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THE CHURCH OF THE FIRST DAYS.

THE CHURCH OF THE FIRST DAYS:

LECTURES ON THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES.

BY

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I.

THE CHURCH OF JERUSALEM.

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PREFACE.

THESE Lectures, like those formerly published on the Epistle to the Philippians and the Revelation of St John, were delivered in the Parish Church of Doncaster, in the ordinary course of parochial ministration. They are, however, somewhat different in their aim, and are published accordingly in a cheaper and more popular form.

The whole course consisted of fifty-six Lectures, of which the first was delivered on the 1st of June, 1862, and the last on the 28th of February, 1864.

They are published as they were delivered, with the omission of a few paragraphs, of merely local or passing interest.

It is needless to say, what will be obvious at a glance, that they are designed for ordinary readers, and aim only at awakening an intelligent interest in a particular Book of Scripture, and shewing how it may be made subservient to purposes of instruction in godliness.

The work will be completed in Three Volumes, under the several titles of *The Church of Jerusalem, The Church of the Gentiles, The Church of the World.* The first extends from the 1st to the 8th Chapter (inclusive) of the Acts of the Apostles; the second from the 9th to the 16th; the third from the 17th to the 28th. It will be seen that the titles are (of necessity) not accurately but only approximately appropriate.

There is no attempt at uniformity in the treatment of the several parts. In some instances a single verse has furnished the topic of an entire Lecture: in others a whole Chapter (or even more than one) has been

embraced in a comprehensive survey. The interests of a Congregation had to be considered, rather than the completeness of a subsequent publication.

Where the Authorized Version has been departed from (as has been the case, more particularly, in the first two Volumes), the translation has been generally made from the 2nd Edition of Tischendorf's Greek Testament (Leipzig, 1849).

In all matters of a topographical or historical nature, reference has been freely made to such works as were readily accessible; amongst which it is needless to particularize Conybeare and Howson's *Life and Epistles of St Paul.*

DONCASTER,
September 30, 1864.

CONTENTS.

LECTURE I.

THE ASCENSION.

PAGE

ACTS I. 9—11. And when He had spoken these things, while they beheld, He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;

Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven . 1

LECTURE II.

THE UPPER ROOM.

ACTS I. 24. And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, show whether of these two Thou hast chosen. 19

LECTURE III.

PENTECOST.

PAGE

Acts ii. 4. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. 37

LECTURE IV.

THE FIRST SERMON.

Acts ii. 37. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the Apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? 55

LECTURE V.

CHURCH LIFE.

Acts ii. 42. And they continued stedfastly in the Apostles' doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. 73

LECTURE VI.

CHURCH LIFE.

Acts ii. 47. And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved. 92

LECTURE VII.

THE FIRST MIRACLE.

PAGE

Acts iii. 19, 21. The times of refreshing.....The times of restitution. 111

LECTURE VIII.

THE GOSPEL BLESSING.

Acts iii. 26. Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities. . . 130

LECTURE IX.

THE FIRST TRIAL.

Acts iv. 19, 20. Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.

For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. 149

LECTURE X.

PRIMITIVE WORSHIP.

Acts iv. 31. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together: and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. . . 166

LECTURE XI.

THE FIRST SIN.

PAGE

Acts v. 1. A certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife. 184

LECTURE XII.

FOUR CHARACTERS.

Acts v. 41, 42. And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ. . . . 204

LECTURE XIII.

THE FIRST ORDINATION.

Acts vi. 15. And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. 225

LECTURE XIV.

LIVING ORACLES.

Acts vii. 38. Who received the lively oracles to give unto us. 244

LECTURE XV.

THE FIRST MARTYRDOM.

PAGE

Acts vii. 60. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. 261

LECTURE XVI.

GOSPEL JOY.

Acts viii. 8. And there was great joy in that city. . 280

LECTURE XVII.

THE SIN OF SIMON.

Acts viii. 22. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. . . . 298

LECTURE XVIII.

A SPECIAL MISSION.

Acts viii. 30. Understandest thou what thou readest? 316

LECTURE I.

THE ASCENSION.

ACTS I. 9—11.

And when He had spoken these things, while they beheld, He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;

Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.

WE have three narratives of the Ascension of our Lord, each of which presents it in a somewhat different application. In that record of it which closes St Mark's Gospel, the

96

aspect of *faith* is predominant. It sets before Christian people, in their life of faithful labour, the form of Him who, though now out of sight, is still and evermore *working with them,* and *confirming His word,* both of promise and of precept, *by signs following.* They are not alone. The eye of faith can pierce the veil which hangs between, and show them, for their quickening, for their encouragement, and for their comfort, Jesus Christ Himself standing for them at the right hand of God. A second record, that of St Luke at the close of his Gospel, presents to us the Ascension in its aspect of *love;* sets before Christian men and women, in their hours of loneliness or of depression, the form of Him, who, when He left this world, left it with hands uplifted in blessing; of Him who, though now out of sight, is *the same yesterday and to-day and for ever;* the same in His tenderness towards human weakness, the same in His compassionate mercy towards sinful men. They *have not an High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of their infirmities,* but One who, having Himself on earth *suffered being tempted,* is able in the fulness of that human experience, no less than in the fulness of His

Divine strength, to relieve and *to succour them that are tempted.*

In considering that revelation which is here presented to us of the same glorious event, we shall have to regard it in yet a third aspect; the aspect of *hope.*

As St Luke's Gospel closed with the narrative of the Ascension, so his second work, the book of the Acts of the Apostles, opens with a fuller description of the same event. The Ascension was not more naturally the close of the Gospel than it was the beginning of the history of the Church. It was the turning-point between the earthly and the heavenly work of Christ. It was that event which, while it withdrew Him from personal work below, introduced Him into that life above, in the power of which He works (in part at least) through others; works through the instrumentality of changed hearts, earnest words, and exemplary lives. The Ascension was the last event in the ministry of Christ: and the Ascension was the first event in the ministry of His Apostles.

We will run through the opening words of this instructive and beautiful Church History, that we may see what place the Ascen-

sion ought to occupy in our teaching and in our thoughts.

The first treatise I made concerning all things, O Theophilus, which Jesus began both to do and to teach. The first (or former) treatise is the Gospel according to St Luke. Theophilus is the person to whom that Gospel also is addressed by name. The subject of the Gospel is described to be *all that Jesus began both to do and to teach* (all that He *did and taught as a beginning*) until the Ascension, as distinguished, we may suppose, from what He afterwards did and taught through the Apostles.

Until the day on which, having commanded the Apostles—through the Holy Spirit—whom He had chosen, He was received up. This was the limit of the Gospel narrative; the day on which He was received up, after having, in the fulness of the Divine Spirit, given His latest charges to the Apostles whom He had chosen.

To whom He also presented Himself alive after He had suffered, after death, *in many demonstrative proofs;* by many tokens of His restored life, which admitted of no doubt or uncertainty; *through* (*during*) *forty days* from time to time *appearing to them, and speaking*

the things which concern the kingdom of God. He was not living with them during these forty days; but from time to time he presented Himself to them, both in proof of His resurrection, and for the purpose of explaining to them, as they were able to bear it, the truth of God which was to be the subject of their testimony to others.

And assembling with them, joining their company when they were gathered together, *He charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father,* the fulfilment of that great promise, *which,* He said, *ye heard from me: for John baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized in* (*with*) *the Holy Spirit not many days hence.*

They then, the Apostles, *having come together, asked Him, saying, Lord, is it at this time that thou restorest,* purposest to restore, *the kingdom to Israel?* Is the fulfilment of the promise of the Holy Spirit to coincide in time with the restoration of the kingdom to Israel? Their minds were still running upon an earthly kingdom, in which the Jewish people, under a conquering Messiah, should be the chief and head of the nations. Our Lord does not stay to correct these notions,

which would soon be set right for ever by the promised illumination of the Holy Spirit: He only answers the question of time.

And He said to them, It is not yours, it belongs not to you, *to know times or seasons which the Father placed,* once for all, *in His own authority.* Taking their question in its most general form, as an enquiry into the time of the end, He reminds them that *of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the Angels of heaven, but the Father only.* And He then directs their attention to that which is a matter of practical duty.

But ye shall receive power, the Holy Spirit having come upon you; and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

And having said these things, He was raised (lifted) up from the earth; *and a cloud received Him*—properly, came *under* and so took Him—*from their eyes.* It is the fullest and most graphic account which we possess of the Ascension. For some time He rose gradually from the earth, and in their full view: then a cloud came between, and intercepted the further sight. They saw the

bodily form, just such as they had seen it so often since the Resurrection, so far as the confines of the world of sight and sense: then they lost it: but they were witnesses that thus and not otherwise did their Master quit the earth: it was not a mere disappearance, a mere vanishing out of their sight: it was not a mysterious removal, through flood or fire: and still less was it a mere ceasing to come to them, a mere inference of departure drawn from their vainly looking day after day for a repetition of His visits to them: it was a simple and a solemn going away: the Saviour Himself, in the integrity of His Person, the soul and the body, rose, while they looked on, from a certain spot of earth where He had just before stood and spoken with them, and by a gentle and a gradual motion ascended as far upwards as the eye could follow Him. Then a cloud came between, and they saw Him no more.

And as they were gazing into the heaven while He went, while He was thus journeying upwards, *then, behold, two men were standing by them,* had already unperceived taken their place beside them, *in white apparel;* the indication, as at the Resurrection, of an angelic

appearance: the *men* here, as there, were Angels in human form: if an Angel, who is a spiritual being, is to manifest himself to human eyes, it must be by assuming for the time a material form.

Who also said, Men of Galilee, why stand ye looking into the heaven? this Jesus, who was received up from you into the heaven, shall so come in the manner in which ye beheld Him going into the heaven.

The words had their effect. *Then returned they into Jerusalem from the mount which is called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey off. And when they came in* to the city, *they went up into the upper room where were abiding* the eleven Apostles, and where *they were all with one accord persevering in prayer, together with* certain *women, and with Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His* once unbelieving but now faithful *brethren.* We must not at present dwell further upon the scenes or occupations of that memorable chamber, the cradle of the Gospel Church. For the present we are occupied with the one fact of the Ascension. And we are to regard it as a fact full of *hope.* The words of the two men, that is, of the two

Angels, give it this aspect. *Why stand ye thus gazing into the heaven,* as though you had lost your all? as though henceforth your one work must be a work of memory, thinking of Him who is gone, as men think of some dear departed friend whom they shall see again no more in this world? Not thus should it be with you. You have been permitted to be eyewitnesses of His Ascension, as before of His Resurrection. Now therefore return, and discern its lessons.

And the chief of these is, that the posture of those who love Christ must henceforth be one not more of retrospect than of expectation. It is well indeed that you should treasure in your mind the thought of Him as He was on earth. To live in His wonderful works, in His perfect example, in His Divine words, is the safe and blessed privilege of the faithful. And to look up after Him into heaven, and see Him now by faith as He lives there the Mediator and the Intercessor and the High Priest of man; the Resurrection and the Life, first of the soul, and hereafter also of the body, of each one of His people; to ascend thither, in heart and mind, after Him, and with him continually to dwell; to seek

and to set your affection on things above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God; this is one great part of the secret of the Christian life below: thus it is that men are made strong for conflict, victorious over temptation, and at last fit for heaven. But all this is a different thing from vain regret and from idle contemplation. To gaze up into heaven after One who is gone, is not the work of His Church below. Rather is it, to gaze up into heaven for One who shall come. And in those few words lies the whole of the vast difference between two states and lives; the state and the life of a true and wise and diligent, and the state and the life of a dreamy and gloomy and torpid Christian. *To wait for the Son of God from heaven* is one half of the abiding condition of him who has first *turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*

But how is it, some may ask, that the Ascension fosters this hope or suggests this duty? The words of the Angels will answer that question. *This Jesus, who has now been received up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye beheld him go into heaven.* The spectacle of the Ascension, vouchsafed to the

disciples, was intended to make real to them the thought of His return. He might have simply disappeared; merely ceased to visit them; and they might have been left to form their own conjectures what had become of Him. Perhaps even then they might have formed the right conjecture. Perhaps they might have said, The risen Lord, risen, as we have seen Him, with His body—though with a body gloriously transformed and only visible to human eyes by an act of will and of condescension—must be somewhere; must have a place and an abode and a home; and we may fairly think and speak of Him as in heaven with God. They might have remembered the words in which, while yet with them, He thus spoke of Himself in reference to the time after His departure: and thus they might have been preserved from the folly of the sons of the prophets who, in spite of Elisha's warning, sent to seek Elijah, after his glorious removal from earth, on the mountains and in the valleys of the neighbourhood from which he had arisen. But all this would have fallen far short of the conviction inspired by the actual sight of the Ascension. There would have been a mystery and a shadowiness and

an unreality about His place and His state, which might well have diminished the comfort and impaired the satisfaction of His disciples in thinking of and in communing with Him. But now they would feel that they could trace and track Him in His glory: they would perceive which way the eye should be turned which would discern Him: they would even look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that should be revealed. They who had seen Him go might expect Him to come. The sight of the Ascension contained the faith of the Advent.

Nothing can be more remarkable than the personal hope of the personal return of Christ, which cheered the first ages of the Church below. And so long as men took their religion straight from the Bible, they retained in all its freshness that living and life-giving hope. *This same Jesus, who is received up, shall so come again in like manner.* It was thus that our Lord Himself spoke of His second coming. *They shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels. If I go and prepare a*

place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that, where I am, there ye may be also. It was thus that the Apostles described the one hope of the Church. *The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trump of God. The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven, with His mighty angels. He shall come to be glorified in His saints. When the chief Shepherd shall appear. At the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, with all His saints. When Christ, who is our Life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory. Be diligent that ye may be found of Him in peace. And now, little children, abide in Him; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. Behold, the Lord cometh, with ten thousand of His saints. Behold, He cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him. Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!*

It is no good sign when the language of the Holy Scriptures is all read as an allegory. It is always a sign of the decay of faith, when men turn the plainest declarations of Scripture

into parable and into metaphor. It was in the dark and cold ages of the Church, when even the wise virgins too often slumbered and slept, that this definite hope of the Bridegroom's coming was obscured and lost sight of. And was it not by a just retribution that they who refused to infer the Advent from the Ascension, came at last from denying the Advent to deny the Ascension also? How many persons, do you suppose, now believe that Christ did actually ascend? How many, at all events, have retained to this day that *beginning of their confidence* in this and other facts of the Gospel history, which was really child-like and trustful? Who has not heard, in our days, of symbolical meanings? of these things being all designed, not to teach a plain fact, but to teach a moral lesson? as if indeed a moral lesson could ever be learnt through illusion, through deception, through falsehood! And if ever the faith of the Church is brought back to its simplicity in matters of doctrine, it must be by its being brought back to its simplicity in matters of fact. Take one of the Gospel miracles by itself, and of course it is improbable. Take the Resurrection, take the Ascension, by itself, and of course it is improbable. But take each one

of these in its connection; take each one of the wonderful works which Jesus did, or of the marvellous events by which He passed to His glory, in connection with the proofs He had given of His holiness, of His truth, and of His goodness, and thus (by the combination of all these things in their perfection) of His Divinity; in other words, take each of them with its context; with the other things which we know of Him, and the other things which He came to do and to teach; and we shall find it not only credible, not only receivable upon evidence, but natural also; consistent, harmonious, and to be expected: so that the most entire faith shall be the most rational, and the simplest believer the wisest, the most intelligent, and the most philosophical.

Even thus is it with the hope of which we are speaking. It might be in itself strange, and hard to be understood, that God should design to bring this Dispensation to a close by the personal Advent of the Mediator in the character of the Judge of man. But view that purpose, that design, that counsel of God, in connection with all that has preceded; view the Judgment in the light of the Incarnation, and the Advent in the light of the Ascension;

and all shall become symmetrical and of a piece. The disciples saw Him go: why should it be incredible that He should likewise come? The very cloud so often mentioned in the prophecies of the Advent had place in the record of the Ascension: *a cloud received Him out of their sight:* even so shall a cloud be the sign when they who look for Him watch His appearing. These things were written to assist our failing faith; to enable us, not only to believe God's Word that thus it shall be, but even to understand in some measure how that Word shall be accomplished. *This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.*

My brethren, what to us is the record, is the commemoration of our Lord's Ascension? Do we know anything of its comfort? anything of the assurance that we have in heaven, living and feeling and ruling, One who knows our frame and has felt our infirmities? One who is concerned in our welfare, interested in our work, bent upon our salvation? One who for this purpose died that He might bear our sins; for this purpose ascended, that He might intercede for us with God, might minister to us

the Spirit, might prepare a place for us in heaven? What know we of the support which the Ascension ought to give to failing faith and to flagging energy? If there is One, up there, who sees and knows, who observes, records, and will judge; *what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness!* how brave ought ye to be in confessing Him, how devoted in serving, how intent in watching for Him! Yes, and, if He ascended, shall He not also return? return as He went? yet not in the sight of a faithful few, but in the sight of a wondering and awe-stricken world? Then shall the wheels of the world's business be stopped, and men must find time to listen to a voice once despised. Then shall the giddy round of pleasure be arrested in its course, and careless women, as well as ungodly men, hear themselves without further preparation summoned to a trial as of life and death. Then too shall the man who has cared betimes for his soul, and for the souls of his brethren, see the descending form, and recognize in it the Lord of his choice and the Saviour of his hope and of his love. Shall it not be said in that day—God grant that from many in this congregation,

awakening from the dust of death, the cry may ascend—*Lo, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for Him, we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation?*

LECTURE II.

THE UPPER ROOM.

ACTS I. 24.

And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, show whether of these two Thou hast chosen.

WE live in a late age. *The world has lost its youth; and the times begin to wax old.* We see this in all ways. The bloom and freshness is worn off from everything. Even within our own recollection this process has been rapidly going forward. Pleasures which would have satisfied a lifetime are now exhausted in childhood. The words of the prophet Daniel, *Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased,* have received a sort of literal fulfilment in our day, with results by no means unimportant. The

multiplication of knowledge, and the multiplication of movement, have been powerful agencies in that process of sophistication and of weariness which all intelligent men observe and all sober-minded men deplore.

This result is not observable in the things of time only. We see it in reference to the concerns of the soul. Divine truth has lost its freshness. Men have wrangled about it until they have worked the very life out of it. And men have received it as a sort of tradition, and professed it as a sort of propriety; a homage done to God, and a decency due to the world; until it has lost its savour of life and its healing virtue, and become, too often, according to our Lord's expressive figure, a thing *fit neither for the land nor yet for the dunghill,* but only *to be cast out and trodden underfoot of men.* It reminds us of the expostulation of the Lord by the Prophet Ezekiel with the shepherds of that day. *Seemeth it a small thing unto you to have eaten up the good pasture, but ye must tread down with your feet the residue of your pastures? and to have drunk of the deep waters, but ye must foul the residue with your feet? As for my flock, they eat that which ye have trodden*

with your feet; and they drink that which ye have fouled with your feet. Such is the responsibility which attends the possession of Divine truth. If we do not value, use, and live by it, we are spoiling it; trampling, as it were, and fouling it; depriving it of its very life and power, for others as well as for ourselves.

Now in a state of things of which this account is no exaggeration but the true description, as all your consciences will bear me witness, how refreshing is it to look back, across the ages, to a time when the Gospel was new; bright with its original radiance, instinct with its primeval beauty! When we are wearied and discouraged by the long familiarity with a sophisticated age and a divided and harassed Church, how reviving should it be to us and how comforting to study the record of a period when our Lord's footsteps still marked the earth, and when the eyes of His people could still sometimes see Him standing at the right hand of God! To read of that first generation of the Christian Church, and to read of it in the writing of an inspired narrator, ought to be full of interest and full of improvement for us who are struggling in our day

through a wilderness less bare perhaps of earthly appliances, but far less brightly illuminated with the guiding glory of the Lord.

It is in this hope that I shall ask you to dwell from time to time upon the history of the earliest Church of Christ as it is given in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles; a Book, of the neglect of which, it is said, even Chrysostom, in the fourth century, complained, and which, we may well believe, is not to any of us quite all that it might be, in point of understanding, in point of interest, or in point of profit. May God Himself, by His Holy Spirit, so open our understandings, and so influence our hearts, that we may be the better, to the very end of life, for having pondered together this portion of His Holy Word!

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles does not profess to be a complete Church History even within the limits of time to which it is confined. It partakes, in this respect, of the character of Holy Scripture every where. The Gospels do not give a full history of the life and words of Jesus Christ. *There are also many other things which Jesus did,* so the Evangelist St John concludes his narrative, *the which if they should be written every one, I*

suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. A sample is given; a specimen is given; enough for use, not enough for curiosity; enough to guide our steps, not enough to relieve us of a thirst for more. It is so in the case of the Book which we are about to open. It is at once full and elliptical. It gives us, here and there, a minute description; one which makes us exclaim, as we read, the man who so writes was himself an eyewitness: he speaks (like his Master) that which he knows, and testifies that he has seen. But again, in other parts, whole years are omitted, or lightly passed over, as though to remind us that the object of all Scripture is instruction not information, or else that the Word of God is no cunningly devised fable but the simple and inartistic composition of common, often of unlettered men, who thought more of revealing the Saviour than of recommending or displaying themselves. *We preach,* the very history seems to say, *not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.*

The object of this Book is to furnish a justification of those last words of one of the Gospels, *They,* the Apostles, after witnessing

their Lord's Ascension, *went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.* What was the word? and what were the signs by which the Lord wrought with them to confirm it? These are the questions answered in this Book, for our satisfaction, admonition, and encouragement.

We have already dwelt upon the account given us in the opening of the first Chapter, of the great miracle of the Ascension of our Lord and Saviour. The Ascension is the debatable ground, so to speak—or, more correctly, the turning-point—between the Gospels and the Acts. It properly ends the one: it properly begins the other. It belongs to both. It closes the earthly life of Christ: it opens the heavenly life of His Apostles. Though they had yet to wait, after that event, for the crowning gift of the Spirit, still that event contained in itself the pledge and foretaste of the other. *It is expedient for you that I go away: for, if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you: but, if I depart, I will send Him unto you.* Till that departure, the words were still true, *The Holy Ghost was not yet given, because that Jesus was not yet glorified.*

The remainder of the first Chapter describes the employments of that brief interval between the Ascension of Christ and the descent of the Spirit. This will be our present subject.

The Ascension took place on the further (or Eastern) side of the Mount of Olives. *He led them out as far as to Bethany*, is the description of the place in St Luke's Gospel. In the passage before us, *they return to Jerusalem from the Mount called Olivet.*

They had already a recognized meeting-place in Jerusalem. St John tells, in his narrative of the appearances after the Resurrection, of a place where the disciples were assembled, with closed doors, on the occasion of two at least of their Saviour's visits to them. And here we read of an upper room—the upper story, no doubt, of some private dwelling-house—to which the little band of disciples habitually resorted at this time as their place of safety and seclusion, of worship and communion. In the courts of the temple they still worshipped as Israelites: they had nothing to renounce there: they were Israelites still: it was *for the hope of Israel* that they still struggled and suffered: but in their upper room they met as those who not only looked for a

Redeemer of Israel, but believed in their hearts that that Redeemer was come.

It was never intended that the worship of Christ's Church should be restricted to an upper room in a common house. Once that worship had to hide itself alike from persecuting Jews and scoffing Gentiles. Now, thanks be to God, it is no disgrace to be a Christian: and when once the rich men and the great men of the earth bowed the knee to Jesus, it was right that wealth and art should employ themselves in building and decorating His sanctuaries. But the question, however obvious, must not therefore be withheld: Are we substituting, or in danger of substituting, an elaborate ritual for a spiritual service? the temple of *art and man's device* for the temple of sincerity and of the human soul? Christian worship needs no such appliances: it is right that it should have them, but it needs them not: and those appliances of costly building and delightful music may overlay—they need not do so, but they may—that true heart-deep devotion which alone Christ values or God accepts.

The number of the disciples at the time we speak of, was about a hundred and twenty. St Paul indeed tells us that that was not, at the

time of the Ascension, the total sum of Christ's people. He speaks of an appearance of Christ after His resurrection to a far larger number. *After that He was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present*—some twenty-five years later, when he wrote from Ephesus to the Corinthians—*but some are fallen asleep.* There is no conflict between the two reckonings. The hundred and twenty are those present in Jerusalem at the time of the Ascension: the five hundred included many who had no doubt tarried still in Galilee.

Amongst these hundred and twenty, first and foremost were the eleven faithful Apostles whose names are here once again enumerated. There were also those pious women who had followed Jesus in life and ministered to Him in death. There was *Mary the mother of Jesus;* here mentioned yet once more, and for the last time, before she disappears from the page of sacred history. It was not intended that she should be placed so prominently before the eyes of the Church, as to give any sanction, however slight or imaginary, to an undue reverence for her. She was now an honoured Christian woman, and no more. Our Lord

Himself had said, that every one of His disciples might share with her His regard and His love, who faithfully did the will of His Father in heaven. Strange that such silence and such mention should have been capable of being perverted as they have been! Strange that a large part of Christendom should have paid, notwithstanding, to His human mother a reverence absolutely divine, and even allowed that reverence to outshine and to obscure, in their worship, the honour due to the Father and to the Son! She whose place is now thus distorted below was content, while Scripture still speaks, to worship amongst the hundred and twenty, one of many believing servants of her Divine and now glorified Son. *These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren.* For they also, His brethren, once unbelievers and cavillers against Him, were now enrolled among His devoted people.

And what was the work of His devoted people during these remaining days of suspense? They were fulfilling their Lord's command not to depart from Jerusalem on their several missions of toil and danger, until they should *be*

endued with power from on high. The interval was spent in prayer and supplication. They were practising now the new work of Christian worship. They were learning to think of their Master as unseen yet ever near. They were learning to speak to Him and to commune with Him, without sight, out of sight. Much had they to learn in learning this. Is it not one of our own chief difficulties, this speaking to the Unseen, this seeing Him who is invisible? Does it not take most of us a whole lifetime to learn to do this as we ought; undoubtingly, peacefully, profitably, successfully? Let us encourage ourselves with the thought of those whose footsteps are before us in that endeavour. They had seen Him; they had heard Him speak; they had been His friends; they tell us of Him still in their writings, what He was and what He did; for this reason above all else, that we may be able to imitate them in believing when they could no longer see, in trusting in the dark One whom they had first known and lived with in the light.

This was their employment during the ten days between Ascension and Whitsuntide. They *all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication.* The time for action was not yet.

They had not yet received the power from on high. Their position resembled in one respect that of the separate state. The soul dissevered from the body is resting, not acting. It is waiting to be clothed upon, before it can resume its work for God. It is waiting for that resurrection gift, that *body as it hath pleased Him*, which God by the agency of His Holy Spirit will bestow in due time upon each of the faithful. Even so were the disciples, at the time of which we here read, waiting for that gift which should qualify for action. Prayer and supplication, not yet ministry and apostleship, this was their posture and their duty.

Just one thing they could do in this interval. They could recruit their ranks, to be ready for the word of command. They could review the gap which treachery had made in their little army, and replace him who had played the traitor. And in this way they could, as it were, assure themselves by experiment that they were indeed in communion and contact with their Invisible Lord. If their Master heard and answered, when they called upon Him to fill the vacant place below, they might feel the more confident in His nearness to them, in His care, and in His love.

It was therefore on one of those ten days that St Peter rose amongst his brethren, and called them to notice the deserted seat of Judas. He told them that prophecy had not been silent upon that desertion. There was a verse in one of the inspired Psalms of David which had waited until the fall of Judas for its literal fulfilment. With the circumstances of that fall they were all familiar. That fatal field, purchased with the reward of iniquity, did not its very name recall the memory of that obstinate perfidy and of that irremediable ruin? But the same Book which predicted the breach directed also its reparation. It foretold the occupation by another of the vacated apostleship. It said, *His charge,* or *office of oversight, let another take.* What then was the condition of such an occupation? What qualification must be possessed by the new Apostle as by the eleven who remained? He must be one of those who had accompanied Jesus on earth through the days of His ministry. From first to last he must have been a witness of His Divine life below. But for this he would lack the characteristic mark of the Apostle, as a witness, in the highest degree competent, of His resurrection. They who had been with Him

throughout His earthly ministry could best tell whether the Risen and the Crucified were one. Three years and a half of intimate knowledge, of constant companionship, would suffice, as a shorter acquaintance would not, to make it impossible that there should be mistake or error as to the identity of the dead Man and the living.

The disciples heard and acted upon the counsel of St Peter. From amongst their whole number they selected two persons possessing the specified qualification; *Joseph called Barsabas, surnamed Justus, and Matthias.* And now the time was come for a direct appeal to the guidance of Him who had promised to be with them alway, to hear the petitions of even two or three persons met in His name, and who certainly would not fail them in so solemn a decision. *They prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men;* Thou who knowest what is in man, and canst alone distinguish infallibly between true faith and false profession, between the hidden grace which qualifies and the empty pretension which is valueless for Thy service; *show which one of these two men Thou didst choose*, in Thine eternal purpose, *to receive the* vacant *place in this*

ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, to go to his own place, to the fit and appointed home of the ungrateful, the hypocrite, and the traitor. *And* then, after this earnest prayer for guidance, *they cast lots upon them, and the lot fell upon Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.*

I know not that I can add anything to the direct warning and instruction conveyed in these words.

Each one of us has a place, yes, a ministry and a mission, assigned to him, in the Church of the living God. Christ has brought us near to Himself, by invitation, by instruction, by sacraments, by ordinances of worship; by talents, few or many, assigned; by opportunities, larger or scantier, of doing God service. We exaggerate to ourselves oftentimes the differences between our advantages and those of the first disciples. If they possessed what we cannot have, in the actual sight and contact of *the Word made flesh and dwelling among them;* on the other hand, we must not forget how everything in the position and character of Jesus of Nazareth went against their preconceptions of what the Messiah would be. Little do we, when we thus judge, enter into the great fun-

damental difficulty, of believing a Man to be also God; of seeing in one who was manifestly like themselves in every feeling and in every infirmity of their nature, the very and eternal Lord, by whom they themselves and all things were made. Slowly and painfully must those convictions have been formed in the hearts of any of them. Even the most open-minded and the most frank-hearted of all the Apostles must have risen by slow and gradual advances from the love of the Man to the faith of the God and Man. We are spared this difficulty. We hear of Christ as our Saviour, our Divine Saviour, as soon as we hear of Him at all; and the very absence of sight, creating one impediment, removes and precludes another. If He is not near enough to be realized, at least He is not near enough to be despised.

And I say that every one of us has given to him something of the very ministry and Apostleship of Jesus. Need I tell any of you what he might do—what he must either do or refuse to do—as his Master's witness below? Can you not so live—or might you not once so have lived—as to remind people of Christ; to make them think of Him; to make them feel His power and His goodness; or else, on the

other hand, to encourage them and to help them in forgetting Him? That then is your Apostleship; your ministry and mission below. If you love Christ yourself, if you live always as in His sight and hearing, then you are confessing Him before men, and calling others also to come and follow Him likewise.

And, if not—O, do we not see, before it is uttered, how false we are to Him, how faithless, how treacherous? We read in Scripture of persons who *crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh:* are there none who betray the Son of God afresh? betray Him sometimes, like Judas, for money; for a paltry base gain which they cannot forego though they see it to be dishonest? betray Him sometimes for the sake of a vile lust, which they cannot renounce though they see it to be ruin? betray Him sometimes, like Judas, with a kiss; saying, *Master, Master,* even while they bring upon Him the enemy that is to crucify Him? And then, after a life of this kind, they go, one by one, *to his own place:* alas! if the Scriptures be true, it is so: and then a fresh election, as it were, is held to fill their place: the ranks of Christ's servants will not go unreplenished, by reason of our unfaithfulness: even of the stones God could

raise up true children to Abraham; and if the redeemed will not praise Him as they ought, the very stones would immediately cry out. *His charge, his oversight, let another take.* God grant us grace not thus to forfeit our apostleship! Let us confess our past unfaithfulness; the thousand times, the ten thousand ways, when and in which we have been treacherous to our Master: and let us return to Him, saying, *We have sinned: heal Thou our backslidings! Declare not our place yet vacant: give us grace rather to occupy it ourselves for Thee! And at last, when we go hence and are no more seen, let it be in repentance, not in remorse: let it be, not to the home of the hardened and of the hypocrite, but to the abode of rest and peace, where Thy servants shall indeed serve Thee; where we shall see Thy face, and follow Thee at last whithersoever Thou goest!*

LECTURE III.

PENTECOST.

ACTS II. 4.

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

YE shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost—such was the Saviour's parting promise—*not many days hence.* The exact day was not specified, and still less the precise nature of the gift itself. A posture of expectation has always been the posture of the true Church below. For ages and generations the expectation was that of the Messiah's coming. And no sooner did the Messiah appear in human form, than a new season of expectation set in; the expectation of His second coming, not in the humility of *the Word made flesh,* but in

the *power and great glory* of the Judge of quick and dead. Nowhere is there, and nowhere ought there to be, any such thing as mere retrospection, or mere satisfaction, on earth below. Many chief graces can only be fostered or exercised by looking forward and by looking upward. When once rest comes, entire rest, then will it be heaven, not earth. And even heaven will have, we doubt not, its expectations as well as its retrospects.

The condition of the disciples between Ascension and Pentecost was one of expectation in a double sense. They were taught by the Angels to begin at once looking for their Lord's return. *This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.* In that respect therefore they were even then as we are now; expectants of the Advent. But there was a near return as well as one more remote. When our Lord said to them, before His Passion, *I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice,* He said so, we believe, in no less than three senses. He would see them again, within a few short days, in Resurrection, His own Resurrection. He would see them again, after whole centuries had passed away, in *their* resurrection; making good to them the

expressed hope of the Psalmist, *I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness;* or of St John, *We know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is.* One of these two returns had already taken place. They had seen Him again. They had been able to report one to another, *We have seen the Lord. Then were the disciples glad, when* even in a short occasional visit *they thus saw the Lord.* And now that this return was over, they were already beginning to look for the greater, the final one. *To wait for His Son from heaven* was henceforth one half at least of the whole duty of a Christian.

But between these two returns, the past return and the final return, there lay, in near prospect, yet one return more: a spiritual but not therefore an unreal one; nay, perhaps, of all, the most real and the most closely personal. *The world seeth me no more, but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also:* this was the kind of reunion with their Saviour for which, however little as yet understood, they were now diligently and earnestly waiting. We are to read of that great event now; God grant, not only as of an event or fact in Christian history, and in the world's history, of which the

fruits remain unto this present; but also, and still more, as one full of consequences for us, one in which, more than in ought else, we are ourselves like them and one with them!

We have read how they spent that time of double suspense. *They all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication.* And we have read of the one act which during that interval they were qualified to perform; that act which we have described as a recruiting of their ranks to be ready for the word of command; the supplying of the vacant place of Judas in the little army of the Apostles. And now we find them, at the dawning of the day of Pentecost, gathered together, as their daily custom was, in one place. We are not told that they had any intimation that that day was to be to them *the* day; the day of spiritual baptism; the day of grace and apostleship; the day of spiritual ingathering into the communion and fellowship of their risen Lord. But, in the retrospect, we can see that it was a fit day.

The feast of Pentecost was one of the three great festivals of Israel; a day on which thousands were congregated at Jerusalem from all parts of the known earth. It was called Pentecost (or *the fiftieth day*) from one particular

point in the celebration of the Passover; the waving of the sheaf of the first-fruits of the harvest on the morrow after the Passover-Sabbath. From that day they were to number seven complete sabbaths, *fifty days unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath;* and then arrived the feast of weeks or of Pentecost: on which occasion, as at the earlier yearly feast of the Passover, and as at the later yearly feast of Tabernacles, all the men of the nation were required to appear before the Lord at the place of His sanctuary in Jerusalem.

The feast of the Passover had already found its antitype in that solemn season at which Christ the Paschal Lamb was sacrificed for us. The feast of Tabernacles, the annual celebration of the completion of the toils of harvest and vintage, and of the national rest which followed upon the entrance into Canaan, is to find its antitype, not on earth, but in heaven, even in that rest which remains there for the people of God. The intermediate festival of Pentecost was to have its antitype in that great gift which the Chapter before us describes. The Jewish tradition marked out the feast of Pentecost as the commemoration, year by year, of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. And

in this respect—though the reckoning by which it is established is less than certain in its chronology—peculiar significance would be given to the choice of the day for the giving of that new law, of the Spirit of life, by which the commandments of God were to be written, not on tables of stone, but as it were on the tablets of a renewed and willing heart. At all events the festival of the first-fruits was now to be fulfilled in that gift which St Paul describes as *the first-fruits of the Spirit;* that is, the Holy Spirit as the first-fruits of the heavenly inheritance; as the pledge and foretaste of that eternal life which consists in the knowledge of Him, the one true God, and of Jesus Christ whom He hath sent.

Such was the festival which (as the first verse of the Chapter describes it) *was* now *fully come;* or rather, perhaps, *was on the point,* or *in the act, of being fulfilled;* just dawning, we may suppose, for the day to run its course. At the dawn of the day of Pentecost, the disciples *were all with one accord in one place.* We are not told where: the words which follow might seem to indicate their customary place of meeting.

And there arose suddenly, out of heaven, a

sound as of a rushing mighty wind; and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven—or rather, *distributed*, or *parting themselves among them—tongues as if of fire; and it rested*, one of these tongues rested, *upon each one of them. And they*, the disciples, *were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues*, in languages different from their own, *even as the Spirit granted to them to utter. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem*—some perhaps resident there, and others having come up thither for the festival—*Jews, devout men, of every nation under heaven;* Jews, for the most part, not by birth, but by religion. The list which follows shows this strong expression to be scarcely hyperbolical. *And this sound having taken place*—the *rushing mighty wind* described in the second verse—*the multitude came together, and were confounded*, thrown into astonishment and confusion, *because that every one heard them speaking in his own dialect;* not only in the language, but in the very dialect of the language, which was his own. *And they were amazed, and marvelled, saying, Behold, are not all these men who are speaking Galilæans? And how hear we, each one in our*

own dialect wherein we were born—our own native tongue? And then follows an enumeration of the various races to which they belonged. Each one had its own tongue and its own dialect: and yet, however many in number, however distant in position, however various in race, *we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.*

The subject thus brought before us is, in every point of view, one of the most remarkable, one of the most serious, yes, one of the most solemn, which can possibly engage the mind of man. I must pause at the verse which we have reached, and would pray God to give us some portion of that gift of which we are reading, to make the fact and the doctrine impressive and salutary to the hearts here open before Him.

Two things need to be here distinguished: the origin of the gift, and the gift signified.

1. We all know how backward men are in understanding, and how stubborn men are in disputing, the existence of what we call spiritual or supernatural influences. You know how they seek to resolve everything into workings of nature, of chance, or of imagination; how they trace one thing up to enthu-

siasm, and another to excitement, and another to fancy, and another to a morbid condition of mind or body; and how impossible it is to elicit from some lips the hearty, serious confession, *It is the Lord:* surely the Lord is in this work or in this word; the hand of God, the will of God, the Spirit of God, and not of man only. There is no spiritual influence, however remarkable, which the philosophers of this age, nay, which the theologians of this age, would not be able to explain away, to laugh down, or to resolve by subtle argument into an operation either natural or else morbid. It is well perhaps that the Gospel itself, with its doctrine of the Saviour and its doctrine of the Spirit, was launched in the world, and established in men's convictions, in an age of greater simplicity and of less presumption.

But if in any age God would make it evident to man that He, He Himself, is at work, I know not how it can be done without that which, for want of a better term, we denominate miracle. If our Lord would convince common men that He had all the power of God in heaven and in earth, was there any mode so really decisive as that which the Gospels describe to us; manifestations in act of His

supremacy over nature, of His supremacy over man, and of His supremacy over Satan? Those who had actually seen Him still a tempest, raise a corpse, and cast out a devil, must have felt that God had given them that sort of evidence which nothing could shake of the Messiahship and of the Divinity of His Son Jesus Christ. Even thus was it with the coming of the Holy Ghost. Hearts might have been influenced, lives might have been changed, the stream of habit turned backward and the chain of sin inwardly broken; and men might have ascribed all this to experience of consequences, force of character, or strength of will. If it was to be made plain, beyond further gainsaying, that the Holy Spirit of God had Himself descended to make His abode and His temple in the Church and in the hearts of men, there must be some sign, accompanying that advent, of which the senses could take cognisance, and from which no inference but one only could be drawn.

Such a sign was that marvellous power of which the passage before us gives the first example. If unlettered men—fishermen, perhaps, from the sea of Galilee—at best, men who could cast up a reckoning and calculate

the lawful gains of a receipt of custom—were heard to utter sounds recognized by men of diverse nations as words and sentences of their native speech; if the audience was large enough, and various enough, and unwilling enough, to make the evidence of the fact ample and infallible; what other explanation could be given of so marvellous a phenomenon, save that which St Peter gave on the day of its manifestation, *This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh?* It was evident that they who thus spoke were overmastered, in the very organs of speech, by a presence and a power within, which was not their own, but the very presence and power of God Himself.

And is there anything irrational, except indeed to an Atheist, in the supposition that God might design to bestow upon His creatures a direct personal communication and influence from His own holiness and from His own love; or, designing so to do, should make it plain beyond contradiction whence that communication and that influence was derived? It can be no reproach to a Revelation, that its utterance is decisive, or of a kind intelligible (as to

its proofs), not only to the wise and prudent, but to the judgment of unlettered men.

In the signs which accompanied the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the disciples, we can recognize every one of the emblems by which He had been foretold. There is the rushing mighty wind, *blowing where it listeth*, audible in its sound, inscrutable in its source and destination, by which our Lord Himself, in His earliest recorded discourse in the Gospel of St John, had sought to typify and to illustrate the Spirit's work. Again, there was the fiery flame—dividing itself amongst the individuals of that assembled throng, till it rested upon the head of every one—which had been taken from the first as the description of the Saviour's Baptism, in its various offices of illuminating, purifying, warming, cheering, enkindling, transforming, the human soul: *He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.* And once more, the wind which struck the ear, and the fire which arrested the eye, was followed by the appropriate sign of the voice which bore witness to the informing, instructing, and counselling presence within. The symbols were as appropriate as the testimony was authoritative.

2. Such was that which we have described

as the sign of the gift. And now what, in itself, was the gift signified?

We read of it in its prediction, and we read of it in its experience. Look, for the one, amongst many other passages, to the 14th, 15th, and 16th chapters of the Gospel according to St John. Look, for the other, amongst many other passages, to the 8th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, and to the 5th chapter of the Epistle to the Galatians. Study those few chapters; and you will see how little they can enter into the fulness of the great promise, who either imagine it to have been designed for Apostles only, or conceive of it, even in them, as consisting principally of what we term miraculous gifts. The Holy Spirit was promised as the Comforter, the Remembrancer, the Teacher, the Guide, the inward Advocate, the very Representative of Christ, the very Presence of God and of Christ, in the soul within: His coming was to make it a gain even that the Saviour should depart—so far better should it be to have the Father and the Son dwelling in a man by the Spirit, than to have even the daily comfort and happiness of the company and converse of the incarnate Son of God below. And what then was the experience of

this great gift? How did they describe it, who had sought it and found it for their own? Hear, my friends, yes, read and judge for yourselves, what St Paul, who was not present on the day of Pentecost, but only received the gift afterwards as any one of you might receive it in answer to hearty heart-deep prayer —judge for yourselves, as you read it in his own earnest words, what St Paul found the gift of the Holy Ghost to be to him. Hear him tell how the Holy Ghost within had set him free from the bondage of sin and death; how He had turned him from having his heart and affections set on things below to having them all set on things above; how he had found the Holy Spirit to be indeed a Spirit not of fear and dread, not of abject terror and instinctive shrinking from God, but the very Spirit of adoption, making him cry evermore to God as his loved and loving Father; how he had found Him powerful to help his infirmities; especially when in the endeavour to pray he had often found himself ignorant and silent, and then had perceived the Spirit making His all-powerful intercession in his behalf in those unuttered and unutterable yearnings which God recognizes and accepts as the very breath-

ings of His own Spirit in the heirs of salvation. Is there not here just the experience, in one of its parts, of the state of each one of us? and is there not here that experience, in the other part, which each one of us needs to make him happy, to make him peaceful, and to make him strong for God?

The gift of the Holy Spirit as here set before us is indeed the very need of man. It is one half—I will not say the greater half, for there is in these matters no possibility of comparisons of less and greater—but it is one half of the whole need of man. We need forgiveness first; the remission, the dismissal, of our past sins, by an act of Divine pardon; an act performed not because it is unnecessary, or comparatively unnecessary, but because it is needed, urgently, indispensably needed; even because we cry, *Lord, be merciful to my sin: for it is great.* That is our first need: is it yet supplied to us? Which of all this congregation has had his sins, or her sins, yet forgiven? And, alas, if not, it is because we have not asked! O folly, O madness beyond all expression, that there is forgiveness waiting for us, and we will not ask! But there is a second need behind, without which even forgiveness

itself would be a mockery. There is the gift of the Holy Ghost also waiting for us; pledged to us in our Baptism; promised to us in God's Word of life; even as it is written, *Your heavenly Father will give His Holy Spirit to them that ask Him.* You have heard what the gift is, in its illuminating, in its instructing, in its transforming, in its comforting, in its strengthening and protecting and guiding power: do not you want it? Are you wise enough, and strong enough, and happy enough, and heavenly-minded enough, fit to live and fit to die, without God's Holy Spirit? Alas! the very question mocks us: No, we are ignorant, and we are poor, and we are weak, and we are often sad, and we are always lonely in heart, unless and until God's light rises upon us; until the Sun of righteousness, which is Jesus Christ Himself, rises upon us with that healing in His wings, which is first the joy of a free forgiveness, and secondly the joy of an indwelling Spirit! Let us learn, learn for ourselves, God Himself being our Teacher, what is the support, and what is the comfort, and what is the rest, and what is the strength, which the Holy Spirit, humbly sought and waited for morning by morning, brings into the heart and soul and

life of man. Never let us go forth to the occupations and the temptations of any one day, till we have brought our empty vessel to be filled at that well of salvation. Never let us start on our day's journey, never let us begin our day's trivial round of duty, never let us enter the ranks of our day's outward and inward conflict, until we have humbly and earnestly asked of God the supply of His Spirit's strength and the sweet comfort of His Spirit's presence. Be we well assured that, if we are filled with the Holy Ghost, as it is our Christian privilege and promise to be, the other words of the text will not be unrealized in us; we shall also speak with another tongue, the Spirit giving us the utterance. How transforming even now, even in these days, is the influence of the Holy Spirit upon human lips! Can we live with a man in whom God dwells, and not perceive it in his words? Is the Divine promise withdrawn or falsified, *These signs shall follow them that believe...they shall speak with new tongues?* Let us all pray, much and fervently, for the spiritual gift of that new, that Divine speech, in the power of which he who once opened his lips only to trifle, to defame, or to deceive, has begun to breathe the sounds of love and joy

and peace, of gentleness and goodness and faith and meekness. Thus shall men take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus. Thus shall we bear that testimony, not of word only but of sign, by which minds are convinced and hearts opened, by which God's name is made known on earth, His saving health among all nations!

LECTURE IV.

THE FIRST SERMON.

ACTS II. 37.

Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the Apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?

THE Gospel of Jesus Christ is based upon fact, and prompts to action. It is not a system of doctrines, and it is not a code of laws, and still less is it a fabric of fancies or theories: it is a record of facts; a narrative, established by adequate testimony, of certain things done and suffered by real persons upon the surface of this real and solid earth. The Gospel tells of things done; not imagined, not thought, not designed only or purposed, not said only or talked of, but done, actually done; and

whatever else the Gospel contains flows out of this source, as naturally, as necessarily, as a stream of water out of its spring and fountain-head. It is this characteristic of the Gospel which makes it at once so satisfactory, and so universal. We can plant the sole of the foot firmly upon it, and it will not fail us or fall away, *for it is founded upon a rock;* and that rock is the rock of fact: we believe, because something was done: nay, we believe that something was done, and all else is the result of that belief. Therefore it is that the Gospel is universal in its application: not the religion of a few philosophers, capable of arguing out deep truths or of rising to lofty mysteries, but the religion of a world, as suitable to the simple as to the learned, to the man of plain common sense as to the man of intellect and of genius. We have cause to praise God, every one of us, for the stability which He has thus given to His revelation, by making truth rest upon fact, and right doctrine upon certain evidence.

And as the Gospel rests upon fact, so also it prompts to action. No sooner is the persecutor of the Church struck to the earth by the bright light of the Divine presence in heaven

than we hear him asking, *Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?* And no sooner does the jailer at Philippi recognize in his prisoners the servants and the apostles of the Most High God, than he falls down before them with the practical question, *Sirs, what must I do to be saved?* And no sooner does the astonished multitude hear from Peter's lips on the Day of Pentecost the explanation of the marvellous sign which has gathered them to listen—how that it was the natural result of the Resurrection and Ascension of the Man Christ Jesus—than they exclaim, in the first workings of that new conviction, *Men and brethren, what shall we do?* What they heard was a narrative of facts: what they understood by it was a summons to action.

God grant to us also, my brethren, as we listen this evening, something of a like spirit! a spirit of faith in Gospel fact, a spirit of readiness for Gospel action!

The strange portent of which we last spoke —unlearned and ignorant men speaking in diverse languages the wonderful works of God —produced various results in those who witnessed it. All were amazed: all were in doubt, saying one to another, *What can this*

mean? but upon some the impression wrought by the scene was an impression of serious awe; while others perversely ascribed the strange sounds which were in their ears to the exciting influence of excess and intoxication. *Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine.*

Such was the motley multitude to which St Peter now rose to address his first Sermon. In our days a Sermon is commonly the explanation, enforcement, and application, of some particular text of Scripture or topic of doctrine: it is thus that we endeavour to arouse the interest or stir the activity of a congregation supposed to believe. But our Sermons would be none the worse for a close adherence in some respects to the Apostolical models given us in this Book. Let us more and more repeat to ourselves, in making preparation for the discharge, on each occasion, of our office of public preaching, the two words, *Fact* and *Action:* the Gospel no cunningly devised fable, but a record of true deeds and true sufferings by a real Person; the Gospel no mere sound of a pleasant voice, no mere performance by one who can play well on an instrument, but rather a trumpet-call to action; the summons of real men and women, short-lived yet im-

mortal, to a certain course of conduct, to a certain manner of life, having this one plain characteristic, that *it will bring them peace at the last.*

St Peter, after a brief call to attention, and an indignant refutation of the charge of drunkenness by a reference to the hour of the day, the third only from sunrise, himself sets us the example of reading or repeating a text for his Sermon. The Bible then was the Old Testament. Out of it Christian teachers were able to plead for God and to prove the Gospel. It was of the Volume of the Old Testament Scriptures that St Paul spoke, when he said, *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.* And again, *From a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.* In our thankfulness for the New Testament we must never learn to despise the Old.

St Peter's text on this occasion was taken from the Prophet Joel. That Book of Holy Scripture was probably composed as early as 850 years before the birth of Christ. Even in

those ancient times the Prophet was instructed to foretell a coming age—described in the general terms, *It shall come to pass afterward*, or, as St Peter here quotes it, *in the last days*—when God should *pour out His Spirit*, or *of His Spirit*, that is, a portion or effluence of His own Holy Spirit, *upon all flesh:* no longer upon a few favoured men, one in a generation, entrusted with a special mission of rebuke or encouragement to their countrymen; but upon His people generally, without distinction of sex or age or rank; upon sons and daughters, upon young men and old, yea, upon the very servants and handmaidens; so that God's communications should be, with all His true people, direct, immediate, and personal, not passing through any human medium, but conveyed to the very soul within by the agency of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life. That was the promise. And with it is coupled, in the three following verses, the prophecy of the coming of the last day. *The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord come.*

We have often occasion to notice that the Prophets of the Old Testament were not in-

structed to reveal the long interval which should elapse between the two Advents of the Saviour. They often speak as though the coming in glory were the only coming; or as though the establishment of the Redeemer's kingdom would result at once from His first manifestation. The delay of the second coming was not even a revelation of the Gospel. Each age was to expect it. The taunt, *Where is the promise of His coming?* was to have scope to operate, because no generation was to be made aware that the Advent might not take place within its duration. And thus it is that the Prophet Joel here speaks of the outpouring of the Spirit as a sign of the last days. The Gospel age, however long it has continued or may continue still, is the Dispensation of the last times: after it comes none other, and itself is to be viewed as one whole, from the redemption which contained in itself not the promise only but the germ of all, until the coming of the very kingdom of heaven in power and great glory. *In the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit...And I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath...before that great and notable day of the Lord come: and it shall*

come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

After this quotation the discourse addresses itself pointedly to the audience. *Ye men of Israel, hear these words.* A man, as you deemed Him, and as (in one part of His nature) He was, has within these few weeks been put by you—by your nation, and by some (it may be) even of those who listen—to a cruel and shameful death. You as a nation, some of you as individuals, seized upon that Man, and *by wicked* (*Gentile*) *hands* nailed Him to the cross. And yet that Man had God's mark upon Him. He was *approved of God among you,* attested and demonstrated by God in the face of the nation and of the individuals of the nation, *by miracles* (*powers*) *and wonders and signs, which God wrought by Him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know.* He could not have done the works He did, if God had not been with Him. And ye are His witnesses: you know that the things which I say of Him are true. And yet you have been His murderers. The blood of that Man, whom God attested before you as His messenger and His minister; the blood of that Man is at this moment upon your hands!

But was then that murder effectual? Did that cruel and shameful death end that sacred life? No, *God raised Him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible that He should be holden of it;* mastered permanently and finally by death. Not possible, by reason of His Divine nature. Not possible, for this further reason also, that the voice of inspired Prophecy had declared the contrary. It was of Him that David spake, when he said in the 16th Psalm, *I foresaw* (*saw in front*) *the Lord* (*Jehovah*) *always before my face,* as my Guide and Hope; *for He is on my right hand,* as my Protector also, *that I may not be moved,* shaken from my standing, by any violence: and then follow the significant words: *therefore,* in this confidence, *my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest* (*tabernacle*) *in hope; because Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell* (*Hades*), *neither wilt Thou give Thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou didst make known to me paths of life; Thou shalt make me full of joy with Thy countenance.* Could words like these have found their full accomplishment in their human author? Could David say of himself, with literal truth, that God would not allow

his soul to remain in the place of the departed, or his body in the tomb to see corruption? David died and was buried, and to this day you may visit the tomb in which his mouldering body awaits the resurrection of the just. The words which David thus spake, he spake as God's prophet. He knew that the promised Saviour should be of his house and lineage; and it was of Him, of that Saviour, that he there wrote in the Spirit. For himself the words could only express that assurance of a life beyond death, which is the hope of the saints. But in relation to Christ the words have a further and a fuller meaning. *He* was not suffered to remain long enough in the grave, even to see decomposition or corruption. *His* soul was recalled from its brief sojourn in Hades, before it had taken up its abode there as a recognized inmate. Of this revival from death, of this return in soul and body from Hades and from the grave, we His Apostles are the witnesses. We have seen Him risen. We have received Him, we have conversed, we have eaten with Him, since He rose from the dead. *This Jesus God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.*

Now therefore the event of this day be-

comes intelligible and natural. The risen Saviour hath fulfilled His promise. He promised to send—He hath sent—His Holy Spirit upon His disciples. *Exalted by the right hand,* by the exerted and manifested power, *of God* Himself; restored to the glory which He had with the Father before the world was; He hath but received of the Father the promised Holy Spirit for His disciples, and these wonderful gifts which ye see and hear are but the expressions and indications of that Spirit's presence.

And hereunto agree those other words of the Psalmist, *The Lord (Jehovah) said unto my Lord, Sit Thou on my right hand,* in the place of glory and power, *until I have made Thy foes Thy footstool.* That prophecy, like the former, points, not to David himself, but to David's Son; even to Him who is as truly the Lord of David in right of His Godhead, as He is the Son of David by reason of His manhood.

Therefore let every family of Israel know assuredly that God made Him, by the one act of recognition, in resurrection and ascension, *both Lord and Christ—even this Jesus whom ye crucified.*

Such was the discourse, to which a blessing

was vouchsafed such as has been granted to no other. Many a more eloquent sermon has been preached since that day; many a sermon as true in its facts and as cogent in its reasoning. But probably no other sermon, through eighteen centuries, has ever been the means of converting three thousand souls. God works where and as and by whom He will; *choosing* oftentimes *the weak things of the world to confound the mighty*, and the illiterate and ignorant and humble to move the hearts, or else to put down the arrogance, of the wise and prudent and noble. We may read St Peter's words unmoved: we have done so many times, and found them but a dead letter: we may even have thought how far more powerfully he might have pleaded his cause, or arranged the materials at his command. But not so did they to whom he addressed himself. *When they heard, they were pricked in their heart.* Compunction was the first fruit of his preaching. They had crucified the Lord of glory. The Messiah had come to His own, and they had refused Him. As a nation, they had despised and rejected Him; as individuals, they were to this moment impenitent and unbelieving. Conscience now awoke. The sign

which was before them was a sign of power: how could this be, save by the hand of God? But beyond this, it was a sign foretold by Jesus; by One who in His lifetime had spoken to them the words, and wrought among them the very works, of God. All things had come to pass, even as He had said to them. And here before them, in all boldness, in all the confidence of truth, and in all the power of inspiration, stand these twelve men declaring themselves to be witnesses of His resurrection. And their own Holy Scriptures, quoted largely and decisively in their hearing, correspond in every point with this fulfilment. David foretells death and resurrection, ascension and glory: Joel foretells the outpouring of the Spirit:—yes, all is now clear and consistent, though the inference is one of shame and condemnation for themselves.

When they heard, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the Apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? If this be our condition; if we are the betrayers and murderers of the Lord of glory; what can we do to repair this ruin, to make amends for this sin?

We will not answer the question at this

time: rather let it press upon us as a question; as a matter of personal anxiety, as well as of deep moment, for ourselves. And let us not separate until we have pondered, in a few last words, the two salient points of the text itself; compunction, and anxiety; conviction of sin, and enquiry after duty.

1. Hearing of Christ caused compunction. What they heard of him was extremely simple. It was nothing more than what we have all heard ten thousand times; just the story of His death, not at all dwelt upon in harrowing detail; just the fact that He was crucified, and just the fact that He afterwards rose and ascended. In them was fulfilled the words written of old by the Prophet Zechariah, *I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn.* They had pierced Him; by the help of Gentile hands, to which they could not wholly nor chiefly transfer the guilt of that sin; they had pierced *Him*, and now the arrow of conviction pierced *them*. *They were pricked in the heart.*

I know not that any words of man could

bring to our minds the same conviction of sin against the Saviour. Certainly no words could bring that conviction to our hearts, without the grace of God by His Holy Spirit. And yet we do read of such a crime as that of *crucifying the Son of God afresh, and putting Him to an open shame.* The Epistle to the Hebrews contains such a sentence; and even says of such persons that *it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance.* God grant therefore that, in its worst form, that of actual apostasy, I suppose, from Christ, that of openly blaspheming the holy name, of renouncing altogether the very profession of His service, none of us may yet have committed it! But there are approaches to that crime. There are those who make very light of the purposes for which Christ died. There are those who contradict and go against the very object of that death; that He might *put away sin; that He might redeem us from all iniquity.* Is there no one here who ever committed sin with another person; helped, in other words, to undo Christ's dying work in another person's soul? And is there no one here who ever tempted another person to commit sin; either by ridiculing his scruples, or by making the way to

sin known to him, or by suggesting to his mind sinful images, or raising in his mind sinful desires? That man, whoever he is, has done worse things than even the Jews who gave Jesus to be crucified. Nothing, however cruel, done to the body, can be so heinous as the least injury done to the soul. Alas! there are those now amongst us, we cannot doubt it, who have more cause to be *pricked in their heart* when they hear of Jesus, than ever had those men to whom St Peter preached on the day of Pentecost.

And if not in this gravest and worst sense, yet tell me, men and brethren, which of you has not cause to be ashamed and sorrowful when he thinks of his Lord and his God? What is a day to you—any day, the best of your days, this holy day, this Lord's Day, if you will—but one succession of slights done to your Saviour? How did it begin? Did your heart rise to Him with the first dawn as to your heart's daystar, as to the very Sun of your soul? Had you not much ado to drag yourself to Him at all? Was not your morning prayer a poor, cold, reluctant service; full of wandering, or else hurried and perfunctory; a duty done, instead of a desire fulfilled, a long-

ing satisfied? And so the day went—yes, I know it too well—full of anything and everything rather than the thought and the love of Christ; full of the world, full of vanity, full of self; only not full of gratitude and praise, not full of devotion and love, not full of heavenward aspiration and of humble hope. Then have not you, have not we all, cause to feel compunction? Is there indeed any thought more condemning to us than that of the dying love of Christ, or any posture more desirable to us, when that thought at last comes, than that of the self-abasing penitent, who cries, afar off, in the distant sight of the cross, *God be merciful to me a sinner?*

2. And this compunction may well work in us anxiety; the conviction of sin the desire for direction. *Men and brethren, what shall we do?* It is the want of this desire which makes our meetings for worship too often cold and lifeless. What would preaching be, if it were in deed and in truth addressed to a number of human hearts, every one of which was inwardly asking, *What must I do?* Preaching, in so far as it is God's ordinance, in so far as it is the work of a true minister, is a finger-post marking the traveller's way, and

saying to wayfaring men, as they successively come up to it in life's weary pilgrimage, *This is the way; walk ye in it!* Let us come together, Sunday by Sunday, in this spirit; crying, in heart, to the ministers of Christ's Gospel, *Men and brethren, what shall I do?* and doubt not but your cry will be heard: if man should fail you, God Himself will be your Preacher; your inward ear shall hear the voice of His Spirit, warning, counselling, directing, comforting, according to your need, according to His insight into your condition. Come in that spirit, *and verily thou shalt be fed! As the rain cometh down, and the snow, from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater; so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.*

LECTURE V.

CHURCH LIFE.

ACTS II. 42.

And they continued stedfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

OUR last text was a question. A vast congregation had listened to St Peter's discourse explaining the mystery of that great day of Pentecost. He had represented it as the most natural thing in the world that the risen and glorified Saviour should keep His word, should fulfil His express promise, by thus baptizing His disciples with the Holy Ghost. They knew from their own Scriptures that an outpouring of the Divine Spirit was to be a sign of the latter age, the age of the Messiah and of the Gospel. They knew from their own observa-

tion by what tokens the Messiahship of Jesus had been attested; they knew also how He had been received by His own to whom He came. Thus far the whole population were His witnesses. From that point the evidence was less promiscuous, but not less really conclusive. It had not been given to all the people to see Him after His resurrection. It is not God's method to overwhelm with demonstrations those who have refused the light given. To those who best knew Him; to those who had accompanied Him through His ministry; to witnesses, in short, the most competent, and of ample number; to these, but not to the thoughtless and unbelieving multitude, *God, having raised up His Son Jesus, showed Him openly.* The rest, who had Moses and the Prophets and would not hear them; who had seen what Jesus was, and would not hearken to Him; it was not to be granted that they should *see One rise from the dead,* whom, even so rising, they would have found excuses still for discrediting. Testimony, evidence, witnesses; an appeal to the understanding, the conscience, and the will; not constraint, not compulsion, not a flash of blinding light, or an intuition of irresistible proof; this

was God's order with men who had set aside the calm influences of words such as never man spake, and of works such as no man could do except God were with Him. These witnesses were now before them. Their testimony begins to-day; the testimony of plain unlettered men, saying, *We saw Him die, and we have seen Him risen.* Your own royal Psalmist spoke of such a marvel; of One recalled from Hades before His flesh could even see corruption; of One whom he calls his Lord set at the right hand of God in heaven. That prophecy was now accomplished. *God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.*

The effect of this address was instant and decisive. Multitudes were *pricked in the heart* with a godly sorrow, and began to ask in earnest, *Men and brethren, what shall we do?* And now we are to trace that work of conviction and conversion into its consequences. We are to see what primitive doctrine, and what primitive practice was; by what means men were gathered into Christ's fold, and how they went in and out there and found pasture.

St Peter's answer to the question last considered was short but full. He said to them,

Repent; change your minds towards Christ, and towards God, towards sin and duty; deplore and renounce the past, form new resolutions, cherish new feelings and new motives: *and let each one of you be baptized on* the strength of *the name of Jesus Christ;* that is, believing in the revelation of Jesus Christ as that which He truly is in Person and work, in office and will: *unto remission* (*dismissal*) *of sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.* There is an outward ordinance to be submitted to, the ordinance of Baptism, as the connecting link between the individual soul and its redemption.

But that ordinance has two conditions; two features of mind which (in the case of an adult) must be formed before Baptism; repentance and faith. First, you must change your mind as to your sins; regret, renounce, forsake them: and secondly, you must believe that Jesus Christ is the only and all-sufficient Saviour of sinners. The former condition is here expressed: the latter is implied in the words *in the name of Jesus Christ:* he who would come to Baptism must believe that Christ is, and is that He is. On these two conditions hang the benefits of Christian Baptism. If by

the nature of the case, as in the instance of Infant Baptism, these two conditions cannot be made good before Baptism, they must be made good after Baptism; and then Baptism will not require to be repeated, but only as it were to be rehearsed, appropriated, and made your own.

Again, as there are two conditions attached to right Baptism, those of repentance and faith, so also there are two promises annexed to it: first, the remission or dismissal of sins; God so putting away our sins that He remembers them against us no more: and secondly, the gift of the Holy Ghost; that inward presence of the Holy Spirit of God, which is the blessing of the Gospel dispensation; as it is said, *I will dwell in them, and walk in them, and I will be their God and they shall be my people. We will come unto him, and make our abode with him.*

On this rock, my brethren, of condition and of promise, the holy Church of Christ was founded below. Let me add two remarks upon this elementary doctrine.

(1) Never seek to be wise above what is written, so as to dispense with ordinances. Through Baptism men passed into the Church

on the great day of Pentecost, when, if ever, it might have been dispensed with in the face of so marvellous an interposition of Divine grace. Through Baptism men pass into the Church still, and *holy and humble men of heart* are contented to have it so.

(2) Next, when we speak of conditions, do not imagine that you are to satisfy these, and then to come to God as it were with the price of acceptance in your hand. These conditions are as much made yours by God's grace alone, as the promises which follow upon them. You must as much ask God for that first gift of His Spirit, by which alone you can be made to repent and to believe, as for that later and more glorious gift, by which you possess God Himself to dwell in you through Christ by the Spirit as the very Life of your life and Soul of your soul.

Then follows a very encouraging assurance as to the largeness and amplitude of God's promise. *For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.* Wherever the sound of the Gospel penetrates, there goes with it the call of God. He calls all men everywhere to Him; calls them to Him as to

a forgiving Father and a long-suffering Saviour and Redeemer. Place no limitations, my brethren, for yourselves or for others, where God has made none. You will want all the freeness of the Gospel offer before you have done with it. You will find in yourself a depth of defilement which will need all the amplitude of the Divine mercy to keep you from despair. And depend upon it, the only Gospel which has a charm in it for human wretchedness and human degradation around, is a Gospel as open, as expansive, and as unrestricted, as the range of Creation, as the domain of the Omnipotent.

The words here written were but a part of the whole discourse of the Apostle on this day of wonders. *With many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.* The exact expression is, *Be saved from this crooked generation.* Submit to be rescued. Let the salvation of God reach you. You are not called to rescue yourselves; you are not called to devise a plan of salvation, or to work out a plan of salvation, for yourselves: you have but to accept, to welcome, to submit to God's healing and saving hand: let Him work: only resist not, only evade not, that outstretched arm of love!

Remember, there is danger, there is ruin, in remaining as you are: *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all sin:* you are a sinner; you need salvation: but God has found a ransom; God has found a Saviour: look to Him, *while it is called To-day,* and be saved!

They then that accepted His word were baptized: and on that day there were added about three thousand souls.

It is fairly argued from this passage that Baptism by sprinkling was not unknown to the first days of the Church. The supply of water in Jerusalem would have been insufficient for the performance, on one day, of three thousand baptisms by immersion: that mode of administering the rite is more significant in its emblem of the spiritual death and burial, and of the Christian's rising again to newness of life; and our own Church permits and authorizes its use: but it is not the quantity of water, we may well believe, which constitutes this Sacrament, any more than it is the quantity of bread or of wine which is of importance in the other.

Now we must not exaggerate to ourselves the condition in which these three thousand persons were at once placed as saints and ser-

vants of God. There was then indeed no temptation to a false profession. To be a Christian was not then as it is now, the passport to respect and honour: it led to nothing then save astonishment, exclusion, reproach, contempt. We may well hope therefore that every one of those three thousand persons was a true convert. But how much must they have had to learn and to unlearn, changed as they had been in one hour from Jews to Christians, from faithless to believing! And yet can we not almost envy now that great, that sudden change? What must it have been to hear the Gospel for the first time; to have it all clean and fresh and fragrant, still moist with the very dew of heaven, still unsoiled and unspoiled by the smoke and by the mire of earth?

Now the text tells us how these persons lived, in that first bloom and freshness of the Gospel. *They continued stedfastly in the Apostles' doctrine;* or rather, *they gave themselves perseveringly to the Apostles' teaching; and to fellowship* one with another; *to the breaking of the bread, and to prayers.* Here are four particulars enumerated.

(1) *They waited constantly upon the teach-*

ing of the Apostles. There was much for them to learn. They knew nothing as yet in detail of the doctrine of their new Master. The particulars of His life; the words of warning and precept, of counsel and encouragement, which He uttered; the spiritual insight given in His discourses into the Law of God and into the Scriptures of the Old Testament; the precious maxims of life and conversation which fell from His lips in hours of comparative privacy when He expounded to His disciples things spoken in parables to the multitude; still more, the various items of that perfect example; His meekness under provocation, His wisdom in answering cavils, His patience in removing difficulties, His abhorrence of deceit and guile, His tenderness towards the conscience-stricken and repentant; above all, the incidents of that last week, of that last night of all, now brought back to their remembrance by the Holy Spirit, with many sharp pangs of sorrow for the share they themselves had borne in adding to His sufferings; and then the reminiscences of visits paid to them again and again after the Resurrection, when He was explaining the secrets of His kingdom and fitting them to be His messengers and ministers in the world; how must

the Apostles have busied themselves in recalling and recounting these things to a congregation all but wholly ignorant of them! how must they have told and told again, amidst breathless silence or murmured satisfaction, words and deeds recorded now and unrecorded in the Gospels; some *written that we might believe*, others untold still, because, *if written every one, the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.* It was one part of the last charge to the Apostles that they should baptize in their Saviour's name; that is, in that sacred name of the Divine Trinity, which is all summed up in Christ. It was another part of that last charge, that they should teach the new disciples to *observe all things whatsoever He had commanded them:* and it was this which remained to be done by patient and repeated ministrations to those who for this purpose waited constantly on their teaching.

My brethren, we are too ready to imagine that we have nothing to learn now from public teaching. We sit in judgment upon our teachers, as though we had all truth and all knowledge already in possession. And most unwilling would your ministers be to speak as

though they had secrets to tell you from this place; anything which you know not, or might not know, for yourselves, from the pages of our Holy Book. Nevertheless we do believe that preaching is one of God's ordinances, and that to it (in its place) belongs the emphasis of that solemn caution of St Paul, *Despise not prophesyings.* It is still, we believe, one mark of the true Christian, as it was in the days of old, that he *waits stedfastly upon doctrine;* upon the teaching of appointed men, whose responsible office it is *rightly to divide* to the congregation *the word of truth.*

(2) In the second place it is said that *they persevered in fellowship* or *communion;* that is, in the formation and fostering of that brotherly spirit of Christian love, which is described for us in the Apostles' Creed as *the Communion of Saints.* It was a thing to which they applied themselves, with all the energy of a new affection, this habit of fellowship or of communion. The three thousand converts of the Day of Pentecost did not separate after their Baptism, each to his home, to live a life of pious meditation in the seclusion of their own hearts with God. They set themselves resolutely to a life of fellowship. We shall hear presently some

of the workings of that life: but, for the moment, take it thus: The Christian is one of a community: alone, he is but a limb cut off from the trunk: separately he must draw his vital vigour from the Head, but that vigour must be used and manifested, not in isolation, but in a self-forgetting fellowship. He must never fancy himself the whole body; either in being independent of the Head from which he derives vitality, or in being independent of the organized system in which he exercises but one function of duty. That is the second mark of a Christian. He attends perseveringly to fellowship.

I ask not how, but I would ask whether, the thought of Christian communion has its place with us? Do we cherish in every possible way the feeling of membership in a body? Is there anything that we do as Christians, in which we have regard to other Christians; to the fact that, as it is written, *Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.*

(3) *They attended constantly,* in the third place, *upon the breaking of the bread.* I need not say to any Christian what that expression means. Rather would I observe how instantly the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper took its

place among the marks and tokens of the true Church; how from the very first it was understood that a Christian is one who observes all that Christ has commanded, and not least His dying charge, *This do in remembrance of me.* Doubtless in the first beginning of the Gospel the Lord's Supper was a daily celebration. And do you suppose that any of the three thousand dared or wished to turn their back upon it? Did they say, It is too sacred an ordinance for frequent use? Did they say, It is meant only for established Christians? Did they say, I will send for it when I am dying: not yet, not yet? Alas! these questions can be answered but in one way; but to scout them as suggestions of an impossibility: and yet how many of us are knowingly, wilfully, and throughout life, acting as if the charge, *This do,* had never been uttered, or as if the Apostles only had ever been addressed by it!

And no doubt there are those who could not without presumption or profaneness attend constantly on that breaking of bread. But does not that inability, of itself, startle them? Does not that conscious inability to approach the Lord's Table sound in their ears the con-

demning sentence, *Thou art none of Christ's: thou art yet in thy sins?* In nothing do we see more plainly the impotency of man to convince or persuade his brother, than in the resolute indifference on the part of many to repeated warnings and exhortations on the subject of that holy Sacrament. We would cease, if we durst, to urge it! The very summons is a weariness; and we know it. But a necessity is laid upon us; and conscience itself wakens within the sleeper to echo and to enforce the call. O that something better than conscience, even a heart penetrated and softened by the dew of God's grace, might at last make that call audible, make it powerful, and make it persuasive!

(4) We have yet one stroke to add to this picture of the Christian life. *They were stedfast* also *in prayers.* No doubt they prayed in secret. No doubt it was a life of prayer. The charge which is to us far beyond and above, so that we treat it as hyperbolical if not exaggerated, *Pray without ceasing,* was to them, in its spirit, a literal precept. Their life was now above, *hidden with Christ in God,* and well might they exercise that life in offices of perpetual communion. Christ was to them not a

name nor a doctrine, but a real and living Person, their Friend and their Saviour, their Lord and their God. They could not have too much of Him! They were as sure of His presence as if He were amongst them in human form; as sure of His loving care and guidance as if they saw His hand or heard His voice. Therefore a life of prayer was to them a life of happiness. Why should they not pray, pray constantly, pray without ceasing, to One in whom every hope centred, and from whom all goodness flowed?

But the particular place occupied by the word *prayers* in the text, leads us rather to think of public than of private prayer; of the worship of the congregation rather than of the worship of the secret chamber. It was a fourth mark of the Christian then, that he was constant in the prayers of the Church. It was not then, as it is now, that any little fluctuation of feeling, or any passing accident of weather or of company, can thin a congregation almost to nothing. It was not then the case, as it is now, that everything is more attractive than worship; an additional half hour's rest, a walk into the country, a newspaper or a novel: nothing felt to be so little

worth exertion as the opportunity of joining in the Church's prayers or listening to the Church's teaching. Alas, my brethren, it is plain that we estimate differently from the early Christians the word privilege and the word enjoyment. We like to keep this world while we can: they loved to live in that world while still below. That which made them happy was to commune with their Saviour: to commune with Him, not alone, but in the company of those who loved Him. They desired to lighten the pressure of things seen and temporal, and to grasp more firmly realities unseen and eternal. We do all we can to entrench ourselves in the present: and when at last we are torn from it by the rude hand of sorrow, sickness, or adversity, we leave its well-known haunts groaning and struggling, as though reality and life were here, shadow and gloom and darkness there!

Let it not be for nothing that these plain common words have been now spoken upon the Christian life of the first days of the Gospel. We have gone almost as far (such must be our reflections) from a primitive piety as from an original righteousness. The Gospel salt has indeed lost its savour: who shall sea-

son it? Apostolical teaching, Christian fellowship, holy Communion, public prayers, all are neglected; in comparison at least with the Scripture model, in comparison at least with the practice of the saints. O these languid, faint-hearted, listless gatherings, of a few from among many, of worshippers with the world in their hearts, of suppliants not caring to kneel or to pray! O for one hour of a brighter and a more fervent devotion, stirred by a deep sense of need, stimulated by a sure hope of acceptance! Let us set ourselves, beloved brethren, to recover, for ourselves at least, something of that which has decayed and is ready to die. Let us come hither as for a purpose: let us not depart hence unheard or unblessed. Let those of us whom unavoidable toils or duties do not bind elsewhere, endeavour to keep alive through the week the flame of God's altar; coming together day by day to hear God's Word, to ask for things needful, and especially to remember in prayer the suffering, the sinful, and the prayerless. And let us and all remember that, as the fashion of this world passeth away, and the only unchanging existence is that of *Him which is and which was and which is to come;* so they only who live

unto Him shall abide for ever, or know anything of that profound, that unbroken peace, which He, *not as the world giveth,* giveth to His people.

LECTURE VI.

CHURCH LIFE.

ACTS II. 47.

And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved.

SOME few features are still wanting to complete the portraiture of the early life of the Church. We gaze upon it as a whole with something of the same feeling which is awakened by standing before the picture of a little child, whose later history has been marked by sad and tragical incidents, or whose developed character has been full of infirmities, faults, and sins. No one imagined that that bright and beaming eye could always remain undimmed, that frank and open countenance continue for ever unclouded. And yet we might have hoped that the departure from that original beauty

would have been somewhat less abrupt, or the fall from that original happiness somewhat less precipitate. We gaze and gaze on, recalling the later history or the developed character, till we can almost fancy that we see in the expression of the child something of an anticipative sadness, or in the lines of the young face something of an incipient debasement. And yet this is fancy; a freak of the imagination, rather than a conclusion of the understanding. Even so it is as we look, in the first chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, upon a scene too fair to last. We would fain wing back our flight across the centuries that lie between, and find ourselves in days when profession was all truth, and conduct all consistency. And yet perhaps in some minds the doubt has already arisen, whether in deed and in truth the condition of the primitive Church was so utterly unlike that of the actual; whether there must not be symptoms even there of that mixed condition which we behold here; whether the infant lineaments did not indicate in some respects the mature developement, and prepare us, in the exercise of a sober judgment, for the divisions and distractions, the faults and follies, of a later and a sadder age.

We dwelt last upon the collective life of the early Christians in four of its main characteristics. We saw them waiting assiduously on the teaching of the Apostles, who were enlightened, according to their Saviour's promise, to remember all that He had said to them, and commissioned (by His last charge) to teach His disciples everywhere to observe all that He had commanded them. We saw them carefully cherishing a spirit of fellowship or communion; regarding themselves not as isolated units, not as separate and self-contained bodies, but as members of *one* body, of which the living Head was Christ, and of which every single Christian was an essential part and limb. We saw them, in the third place, diligently availing themselves of every opportunity of breaking the sacred bread in the ordinance of their Lord's Supper; treating it as at once His latest and most solemn charge, and His latest and most precious legacy, to His people. We saw them, in the fourth and last place, persevering in prayers, not secret only or domestic, but social also and congregational. By these four marks men in those early days could take knowledge of one another that they were Christians indeed.

And now we shall endeavour by God's help to add some further particulars to this description; aided by the last five verses of the chapter which is still before us.

1. The first of these is, the effect produced upon beholders without. *And fear came upon every soul.* One explanation of this may be found in the clause which follows: *And many wonders and signs were done by the Apostles.* Proofs daily witnessed of the Divine power and presence amongst them could not fail to strike fear into the hearts of those who looked on without obeying. But there is more yet than this in the apprehension described. We remember what was the effect upon the wicked king Herod of observing the character of John the Baptist. We are told by one of the Evangelists, that *Herod feared John*—little as he had to fear from him in an earthly sense; far as he was exalted above him in rank and wealth and power—*knowing that he was a just man and an holy; and observed him:* nay, more than this: *and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.* So strong was the awe which rested upon him, that he even obeyed many of the Baptist's exhortations, though there was one, just one, the most im-

portant of all, which he could not bring himself to regard. *Herod feared John, because he was a just man and an holy.* So it was with the observers of the primitive Church. *Fear came upon every soul.* This new kind of life, so serious, so devout, so devoted, so holy, struck awe as well as surprise into the beholders.

Christians do not always know their own power. They ever take it for granted that they are the weaker party. What fears, what anxious, what restless, what panic fears, do young Christians, more especially, often experience, in the prospect of the opposition, or contempt, or ridicule, of careless friends or sinful companions! They are often saying to themselves, How can I stand my ground against this taunt or that threat, against this jester or that tempter? Alas! it is the fear which makes the danger. Let them try: *let them commit the keeping of their souls to a faithful Creator,* and then go forward in the path of duty holding fast the word of truth, and they will find the saying again and again verified in them, *Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.* The difficulties in your path may seem insurmountable at a distance; but as often as you face them manfully in the

name of Jesus, the words of the prophet Zechariah shall be made good in you, *Who art thou, O great mountain? before* God's servant *thou shalt become a plain. They said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great.*

My brethren, you have all of you the power of striking a wholesome and perhaps a saving fear into the enemies of Christ. It is done, not by you certainly, but through you, so often as you are enabled to set a bright and consistent example in your own conversation and in your own life. That is a testimony which men cannot gainsay. All else they may laugh at: your persuasions they may resist, your warnings they may despise, your arguments in defence of the faith they may upset and triumph over: but your example, at once self-denying and charitable, at once strict and sensible, will make its way into their consciences: you may never know it: they may, as they probably will, affect to be indifferent: but not for nothing (even with a view to these days) was it written, that, when men saw the Christian congregation continuing stedfastly in the

Apostles' doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers, *fear came upon every soul.* That is the one weapon, which a woman, which a child may wield, and which no coat of mail is close enough to evade or strong enough to parry. God grant us all grace to use it better!

2. There is a second circumstance to be noticed in the life of those days. *And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.*

In the first ardour of that new conviction, with hearts already in heaven, filled with the daily anticipation of their Saviour's return, they obeyed literally the direction to *lay up for themselves no treasures on earth;* to *sell that they had, and give alms;* to *forsake all and follow Christ.* They could not bear to have, while another wanted. They saw too clearly the meaning and the reality of a Christian brotherhood, to make it possible for them to be satisfied with giving thanks to God who *made them to differ,* while that very difference involved in it distress and suffering to any for whom, as for them, their Master had died.

Nothing but a real community of goods could satisfy the Christian instincts of that infant congregation. It was a beautiful and instructive sight to see that blending of all ranks in one communion and fellowship; to see rich and poor, high and low, old and young, not only practising charity but living in union. It was an example for all times, if not in form, yet in spirit.

Not in form. There is no inspired rule, applicable to all cases, for a community of goods among Christian men. Our own 38th Article declares this, and the Scriptures prove it. We find St Paul, for example, recommending in one of his Epistles a liberal contribution, according to the circumstances of each man, to the relief of the poor saints at Jerusalem; and in another, advising that on the first day of each week every one should *lay by him in store* for this purpose *as God had prospered him.* There could be no almsgiving, and no treasuring up, week by week, of the superfluity of that week's earnings, if in the Church of Corinth to which St Paul then wrote, there had been established, as a part of the Christian system, a compulsory or actual community of possessions. If this had been

so, certainly the congregation alone, and not the individuals composing it, could have been called upon to contribute to the wants of a distant and necessitous Church.

How different, my brethren, was this example of a community of goods from anything which the world has since witnessed! It has been the dream of theorists of all kinds, religious and political, to see all distinction of ranks levelled, and a whole congregation, or a whole nation, living in brotherly concord upon the common property of all. We believe that every such scheme has been based upon assumptions hasty in themselves and mischievous in their consequences. In Christian bodies the attempt to establish a system of communion has led more often to the exclusion than to the consideration of the poor. Selfishness has entered in to mar the work of charity; and the society framed on the principle of a voluntary mutual confiscation has been a society of the rich alone, in which confiscation itself involved no sacrifice. Among political speculators the principle of communism has been too often absolutely anti-Christian; and a hatred of subordination, which is in other words a refusal to accept the rule of God's providence and to

live in God's world as He has arranged it, has been the secret spring of much professed zeal for the rights of man, and of much declamation upon the interests of society.

The example before us was of a widely different kind from either of these. It was the spontaneous, the natural, and the temporary effect of a fresh faith, a lively hope, and a genuine charity. In its form it was not and it could not be permanent. While it continued, it was a wonderful testimony to the strength of the new religion in the hearts of those who believed. *See how these Christians love*, might well be the comment of those who looked on upon a scene so unlike the world of common life. If the Gospel can make a man part with his all; give to the common stock that which he prized chiefly because it was exclusively his own; and be content to live like any poor man upon *the daily ministration* of the alms of the Church; at least there must have been something in it: judge ye, my brethren, what there is, in heaven or in earth, which would have made any one of us *go and do likewise.*

And though the form of that entire self-sacrifice may vary; and we believe that Christ

our Master designed that it should vary with the varying circumstances of the world and of His Church; let us not forget that the spirit of this life must be ours also. If it be best on the whole for the true welfare of society, if it be consistent therefore with the will of Him *whose never-failing Providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth*, that each man have his own store and his own purse; that each man be the possessor of the fruits of his own toil, and the uncontrolled steward of his own resources; if many high and Christian purposes are answered by that gradation of ranks and that variety of fortunes which, whether we will or no, certainly is the form of human society under which God has placed us; yet let us not forget that one end, perhaps the chief end, to be answered by this arrangement, is, that each man, *working with his hands the thing that is good*, may thereby *have to give to him that needeth;* that every one may be able to exercise his individual judgment, and (to a certain extent) his individual choice, upon various objects of piety and charity proposed to him; but certainly not that any one may be at liberty to say, as a Christian man, I prefer keeping to myself, and to my own, all that

I possess ; I disown altogether the character of Christ's steward and of Christ's dispenser ; I will impart nothing, or I will impart sparingly to others, however much they may be in need.

3. We will not return to the mention of points already enumerated, and therefore we will pass lightly over the next words of the passage, which tell us how the early Christians *continued daily with one accord in the temple,* still keeping the appointed hours of the national worship, and *broke bread at home ;* that is, received the sacred bread of the Lord's Supper in the privacy of their own body, in one or more of those houses, or *upper rooms,* which still, as at first, though in larger numbers, sheltered their devotion. But we must pause for a moment on the description of their private and domestic life which follows ; how they *did eat their meat—partook of food* is the exact expression—*in gladness and singleness (simplicity) of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people.*

The life of a Christian ought to be a happy life. The life of a true Christian will be a happy life. His very food has a blessing. He praises God over it. He partakes of it in

gladness. It is to him the token of a Father's love, the indication of a Father's hand. He receives it, as out of God's hand, in his own. And the heart which is glad is also described further as a *single* or a *simple* heart. The word denotes properly *smooth* or *level:* it is the epithet of a field or a road out of which the stones have been carefully gathered, so that it presents no impediment to the plough of the husbandman or the feet of the traveller. *A stoneless heart* is one which has no impediments or obstacles in it; one out of which the roughnesses of temper and the stumblingblocks of sin have been removed by grace, so that it is now level and even, smooth in its course and gentle in its contact.

And these last words may explain to us how it should be that a life of which we have just read that it inspired fear is described also as one of *favour with all the people.* The paradox is more in sound than in sense. It is true that a Christian life, when it is blameless and consistent, is a witness against the sinfulness and the carelessness which surrounds it. It awakens slumbering consciences, testifying of realities above not to be forgotten without danger. In this aspect, it inspires

awe. But in another aspect it is altogether lovely. The world around would be worse even than we find it, if it failed to recognize as attractive that which is *true and honest and just and pure and lovely and of good report.* Let a man be in deed to others that which he would they should be to him, and I say not that they will love him for his religion, but I do say that they will love him in spite of it. It is written of One who was Man and God also, that, as He *increased in wisdom and stature,* He increased also *in favour with God and man.* So is it with His people. Men often show their religion in the most unattractive, the most repulsive form, and then regard their own unpopularity as a proof of the world's hatred against religion. Let them exhibit their religion in its aspect of a world-wide charity, and they will find it otherwise. They will find that, while it inspires awe as God's witness, their religion wins love also as the friend of man.

4. Finally, let us fix our attention on the words of the text itself. *And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved.* We need not stay to vindicate this verse from the misconstructions of a false theology; or to

show that there is nothing here of a Divine selection fixing by an arbitrary sentence who should and who should not be heirs of salvation. The words themselves say, that *the Lord added to the congregation* of the faithful *day by day those who were in the course* (*in the process*) *of salvation.* Salvation, if in one sense a single act, is in another sense a course of acts. A man may forfeit salvation: he may grieve the Holy Spirit: he may quench the Holy Spirit: he may fall away and never be renewed again unto salvation. These things are possible: and while these things are possible, it is as much as we can say of any man that he is *in course of salvation.* And a great thing it is to be able to say this. We cannot say this of a man who is trifling; or of a man who is a despiser of the means of grace; or of a man who is cherishing any known sin. And therefore it is not a light thing to say of a man that he is *being saved.* God grant that we might be able to say it of all who are gathered together to worship! God grant that there be none here who are not seeking salvation as the one thing needful! none who are not willing to give up all else for it! none who are not using the means of grace with all

diligence as the great blessing and privilege of dying men and women in a world of sorrow and sin! none who are not seeking to *cleanse themselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, and to perfect holiness in the fear of God!*

We shall notice one or two plain truths in conclusion.

(1) It is *the Lord* who adds. *The Lord* is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is at work in all that affects the well-being of His Church below. If it were not so, who could endure, who could hope? Without Him, without His Holy Spirit, what is man? what would be Paul or Apollos or Cephas, could they return to us from the dead? much more, what are we, poor, feeble, erring, uninspired men, without the living grace of the Holy Spirit of God working with us or working without us in the hearts of the congregation and of the world below? It was He who *opened the heart* of the first convert at Philippi, *that she attended to the things that were spoken by Paul.* And it is He who opens hearts now to attend to the things spoken by His ministers. O, which of all of us asked Him help and grace before we came hither this evening? We need it more than some of you think. We want

new converts. We want new members of the real congregation of grace. We want new communicants. We want new attendants upon the daily prayers of the Church. We want new enquirers after the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And who can add these to our number, save the Lord only? To Him therefore let our eyes and our hearts be ever lifted up.

(2) It is *to the Church* that the Lord adds. It is not only secret desires, secret resolutions, secret prayers, that we need awakening in us: there must be an adding to the Church and to the Congregation. It is the object of these Sermons to awaken within us a deeper sense of the meaning and importance of a collective Christian life. We ought to be not only (though this be a great thing) a pious people, not only a moral and religious people, not only (though this be a great thing, and the root of all) men and women fulfilling life's duties and satisfying life's relations in the fear of God; but also a people honouring God together, walking to heaven together, together serving Christ, and together working righteousness. Think of these things: shut not up your religion in a selfish isolation, but stir up by mutual help the grace that is in each singly.

(3) Lastly, I would bid you concentrate your thoughts on the brief but significant word *daily*, or *day by day*. The course of this world is a fleeting, a transitory, a rapid thing: we are here to-day, and to-morrow there: to-day in health, to-morrow in sickness; to-day in prosperity, to-morrow in distress; to-day in life, to-morrow in death. In the meantime can we say that there is a daily progress in the things of eternity? Can we say that we are to-day in darkness and to-morrow in the light? to-day in course of ruin, to-morrow in course of salvation? Can we say that each day adds some one to the true Church and fold of Christ? *The Lord's arm is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that He cannot hear.* Then why this stagnation? why this pause and intermission in the work of grace? Why is it that a minister counts himself happy if in the course of a long and faithful service he has seen but one or two souls gathered into his Lord's true Church below? What has become of the word *daily?* Can we afford, any better than the primitive Christians, to lose time in this work of adding? Who has been gathered to-day? who yesterday? who last week? who last month, or last year? The world stops not

for our loitering: sickness and adversity stop not, life and death stop not, while we linger: God of His infinite mercy make us feel the value of time, and count each day lost that has not added to His Church *one* that shall be saved!

LECTURE VII.

THE FIRST MIRACLE.

ACTS III. 19, 21.

The times of refreshing.....The times of restitution.

TWO of the Apostles, Peter and John, went up together to the Temple at one of the stated hours of the national worship. Though they had now a new faith and a new devotion, they did not therefore forget or forsake the old. The Gospel was to them the fulfilment of the Law, not its instant abrogation. They saw in it *the hope of Israel, the promise made of God unto their fathers;* and they never admitted that in becoming Christians they had ceased to be Israelites: they could still believe and still worship with their nation, though that nation might refuse to believe and to worship

with them. *We are the circumcision*, they might say, *which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.* Thus they continued daily *with one accord in the temple* as regularly as they *broke bread* in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper *at home.* They still attended at the morning and evening sacrifices, rejoicing in the sign of the one great Atonement, even when the thing signified was already come. The day was drawing on, when God's own hand would abolish the Mosaic ritual by the destruction of the city which He had chosen, and of the House of which He had said, *My name shall be there.* Till then Jew and Christian trod its courts together.

On the occasion of which we are now to read, Peter and John visited the Temple at the ninth hour—three o'clock in the afternoon—the hour of the offering of the evening sacrifice. At the entrance of the Temple-court, they fell in with what was in fact a familiar and daily occurrence; the carrying of a lame man, lame from his birth, and now more than forty years old, to occupy his usual station at that which was commonly called the Beautiful Gate. There he was set or laid day after day to attract the

commiseration of the charitable as they passed him on their way to worship. On this occasion he addressed his cry for charity to the two Apostles; common men, to all appearance; distinguished in no way by any outward sign, as pillars of the new Church, or temples (in their own persons) of the Holy Ghost: he addressed to them his usual petition, with no expectation of any but the usual reply. But the day was to be an eventful one for him. Instead of giving or refusing to give, and passing on, as others passed, into the Temple-precincts, the two men stopped and fixed upon him an earnest gaze. *Look on us*, they said. His attention was arrested. He hoped to receive something from them. Long had his wishes been restricted to the hope of a successful day's begging: thoughts of health and vigour, of motion and enjoyment, had all these years been crushed and mortified; all he looked for was his daily bread, and even that not earned by wholesome toil but dependent upon a precarious pity. He was compelled, under God's afflicting hand, to say (unlike one of whom we read in the Gospel), *To beg I am* not *ashamed.* Men learn at last to accommodate themselves to the most distasteful circum-

stances: even hope, the most pertinacious of human feelings, bounds itself by probabilities; and the cripple *who never has walked* counts it an impossibility, and nothing less, that the power of motion should ever come to him. What must be his astonishment, if he hears two common passers-by address him in these remarkable words! *Silver and gold have I none: but what I have, that I give thee: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!* The first impulse surely must be not astonishment only but resentment; indignation at an unfeeling banter which does but mock his woes. But no: the hand of the speaker is extended; it grasps his own; a strange strength, unfelt before, communicates itself to the foot and to the ancle; he finds himself able to spring from the ground, able to stand, able to walk; a moment afterwards he is entering with his benefactors into the Temple-court, walking with a bounding step, and giving thanks and praise to *the God of his health.*

The worshippers who crowded the place at that solemn hour were witnesses of the scene. *All the people saw him walking and praising God: and they recognized him as the very man who sat for alms at the Beautiful gate of the*

temple: and they were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had befatten him. He was still clinging to the two Apostles in the first transport of grateful attachment, when the whole multitude *ran together to them* in that part of the sacred precincts which was called *the porch* or colonnade *of Solomon.* It was there that Jesus Himself had walked not long before, as we read in the 10th chapter of St John's Gospel, in the winter season, at the festival of the Dedication. There too, as the next following chapter of this book records, the company of the believers were accustomed to congregate, while a solemn awe rested upon the hearts of others, forbidding them to pretend or to intrude.

The moment was favourable for one of those impressive and spirit-stirring addresses by which St Peter in these earliest days, speaking under the inspiration of God, added so largely to the numbers of the Church of Christ. His tone, on this as on a former occasion, was that of one who can see nothing marvellous, nothing surprising, in a Divine Person proving Himself true and proving Himself powerful. *Why marvel ye at this man? or why gaze ye upon us, as though by any power or holiness of*

our own we had caused that he should walk? Is that the only explanation that you can give of the scene before you? It is a great thing, my brethren, when we begin to feel it to be natural that a living Saviour should also work. We have so long taken it for granted that nothing can really come of the Gospel, that it is indeed as life from the dead, when we see the reasonableness of expecting Jesus Christ to fulfil His own word. That is St Peter's argument here. *Why marvel ye at this?* The real secret is soon told. There is One above, exalted after humiliation, glorified after suffering, alive after death, whose hand is here working. *The God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, the God of our fathers*—no new, no unknown God, but One whom for years and generations you have owned and worshipped—*glorified His Servant Jesus: raised Him from the dead, and gave Him glory; declared Him to be His own Son with power by resurrection from the dead;* and then *glorified Him with His own self with the glory which He had with Him before the world was.*

You indeed *delivered Him up;* gave Him into Gentile hands, praying that He might be crucified. *You denied Him in the presence*

of Pilate; indignantly repelled from Him the appellation of *King of the Jews,* and overbore by your violence the repeated confession of the magistrate that *he found no fault in Him.* Thus *you denied the Holy One and the Just, and demanded a murderer to be granted to you. Not this man,* you cried, *but Barabbas!* and *Barabbas was a robber,* and not a robber only but a murderer. He *had committed murder in the insurrection.* It is true, you did not with your own hands take that sacred blood: but God sees through these sophistries, and counts as done by you that which you *got* done. *You killed the Prince (Author) of life:* but *God raised Him from the dead, and we are His witnesses:* we saw Him dead, and we saw Him risen.

And it is *His name, through faith in His name,* which *made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea,* it is *the faith which is through Him,* faith in God through Jesus Christ, which *gave him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all. His name:* He Himself, revealed as God and Man, as crucified and risen and glorified; He Himself, as that which He is, performed this cure; gave this miraculous, this perfect soundness of which you

all are witnesses. And as His name, which is He Himself, was the true Author, so faith in His name, in that name which is He Himself, was the true and only instrument of the miracle. In His name, as His commissioned and accredited servants, we did that we did: to Him we looked up; from Him we drew the power: we who wrought tell you how we wrought, by what means, in whose strength. But for Jesus of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, we had neither undertaken it nor succeeded. He lives, He works, He hath *all power in heaven and in earth: by Him*, by Him alone, and through faith in Him, *doth this man stand here before you whole.*

And think not, brethren, that we would bear hard upon you for your part in that guilt of sacred blood. *I know that by ignorance ye acted;* even as He Himself prayed on the cross for His murderers, and said, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.* You ought to have known, but you did not. *I did it ignorantly in unbelief.* And through that guilty yet ignorant act of man there was wrought out a mysterious but most real purpose of Divine love. *Things which God foreannounced by the mouth of all the prophets,*

namely, *that His Christ should suffer, He so fulfilled.* He brought unto good that which you meant only for evil: through the murder of His beloved Son was accomplished a world-wide redemption.

And yet there is room.

Repent therefore, and be converted (change your minds, and turn ye) that your sins may be blotted out (unto the cancelling or *obliteration of your sins); that so there may come seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send forth Him that hath been prepared for you, Christ Jesus, whom heaven must have received*—must retain—*until* certain *times of restitution of all things, which God spake of by the mouth of His holy prophets from eternity.*

Here are (1) the conditions of salvation by Christ: repentance, and conversion; change of mind, and change of life; reviewing the past with true contrition, and turning to God with full purpose of amendment: (2) the immediate result, forgiveness; the cancelling of sin; the obliteration of the guilty record; the *casting all our sins* (as the prophet Micah says) *into the depths of the sea;* the so passing by, the so dismissing, the sins of those who truly re-

pent, that He remembers them no more: and (3) the future result; *repent and turn...that so there may come from God's presence seasons of refreshing;* that so, the number of His elect being at last accomplished, He may send Jesus Christ, the Saviour, whom He hath prepared for you, and who is now in heaven awaiting the arrival of those times of restitution, restoration, reparation of all things, which have been the great subject of Divine prediction from the first day that God spake to fallen man even unto this hour. The arrival of the times thus described is made to depend upon the repentance and conversion of man. Repent and turn, in order that those times may come. Certainly without repentance and conversion those times will never come to *you.* But, more than that, those times will not come until the number of God's elect be full. And St Peter tells us that those times are even delayed lest any soul should be cut short in its impenitence. *The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.* When those times do come, repentance will be precluded, will be impos-

sible. And *the day of the Lord,* however delayed, *will come,* St Peter adds, *as a thief in the night.*

I would turn your thoughts, in conclusion, to the two aspects, presented in the text itself, of the future which the Gospel reveals to us. The period to be introduced by the second coming of the Saviour, the period which we often describe by the incorrect but expressive term "eternity," will be first a period of *refreshing,* and secondly, a period of *restitution.*

1. A period of *refreshing.* The word thus rendered is properly a revival by fresh air; the consequence of letting in a breeze of cool and invigorating air upon one who has been long fainting under a sultry and oppressive atmosphere. Such a revival as that, will be the result of the second Advent of Christ to all who look for Him and love His appearing; to all who are through this life waiting and watching for Him, with the girded loins of a Christian diligence, and with the burning lights of a Christian vigilance.

Times of refreshing. Do not we want such times? Are we not all conscious of the oppressive weight, as it were, of this world's

atmosphere? Do we not all feel ourselves oftentimes fainting with the closeness and sultriness of the air we are forced to breathe? I speak of our hearts and souls, not of our bodies: what a load seems here to lie upon them! Who has not often said with the Psalmist, *O that I had wings like a dove: for then would I flee away and be at rest?* It is not so much of the oppression of unkindness or persecution that we now speak: that is rather, as the Psalmist found it, *a stormy wind and tempest,* which may indeed shake our home, or scatter far and wide the blossoms of earthly hope, but which has in it something of a wholesome severity, preventing us from making our rest here, and rousing our whole being (if we be Christians indeed) into a more resolute and vigorous vitality. We speak rather now of a sultry closeness; of that stifling heat which at once indisposes and incapacitates for exertion; of that sense of breathing an exhausted air, or living in a crowded cabin, which paralyzes every energy, and at last forbids repose itself. Even thus it is, in different degrees, with all Christians here below. How seldom does the refreshing breath of God's Holy Spirit revive them into the buoyancy of conscious life and

health! How seldom does the sweet influence of the Divine presence lift them into that upper air, where no earth-born cloud darkens their sky, and no noxious vapour damps or poisons their atmosphere! They can tell the times when this has been their bright experience. They remember, once in a year, or once in a lifetime, a season of sweet refreshment, when God was perceptibly near them, and they breathed in perfect freedom the air of a heavenly communion. But far more often they would have described themselves as persons sighing for light and air, hungering for food, thirsting for water; just able to keep alive one spark of faith in the great future, but living for the present in a murky dimness with which the thought of heaven and of God was wholly incongruous and uncongenial. The world seems to close us in with a narrow and narrowing compression, until the very idea of an expansive freedom becomes unnatural to us and unreal. In prosperity, the air of earth is laden with a luscious perfume, lulling us into a stupor which is no repose. In adversity, we seem to be confined within the walls of a sick room, from which worldly pleasure is banished, without the admission of a heavenly visitant.

These things may be called by some the morbidnesses of a religious fancy: but none the less would we appeal to the hearts of those here present before God, whether there is not in the description a semblance at least of their own experience; whether they, as a matter of fact, do not desire, and do not urgently need, that great change of which St Peter here speaks as a season of refreshing; when *the souls of the faithful, delivered from the burden of the flesh,* shall be *in joy and felicity;* or rather (for it is to a further point still that our eyes are directed) when the soul which has had its rest shall be reunited to the body which has undergone its transformation, and when the entire man, complete in soul and in body, shall be for ever in his Saviour's presence, permitted to enjoy it, and qualified to enjoy it, through the ages of the eternal age.

2. The same prospect is described further as a time of *restitution.* What a tangled, disordered, inverted thing is the world as we see it! What a scene of departure from an original arrangement; of deterioration from any condition in which God could ever have pronounced it to be *very good. The whole crea-*

tion, St Paul writes, *groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now: and not only they, but ourselves also, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption.* Only see, for example, how the *relations* of life are disorganized! See what misfortunes, see what sorrows, see what crimes, spring out of the affections! See the hearts of fathers turned from their children, and the hearts of children from their fathers! See the weaker and the more trusting half of mankind made the sport and the victim of the stronger and the less sensitive! See the distinction of ranks now cruelly aggravated, and now violently obliterated! Is it not the very scene of which it was written of old in God's Holy Book, *I will send you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord...Elias verily cometh first and restoreth all things...lest I come and smite the earth with a curse?* And under the government of a righteous and holy God can it be conceived that this state of things should be perpetual? Is not the very extent of the ruin a prophecy of the restoration? Can it be that God should thus have made all things in vain, and suffered His own beautiful handy-

work to be thus marred and desolated finally? It has been the language of all prophecy, St Peter here says, from the very first to the very last of that *goodly fellowship*, that there shall be a time of restitution, a time of reparation, of rectification, of restoration of all things. *We*, the same Apostle writes in his latest Epistle, *according to His promise, look for new heavens, and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.* He who created can re-create: He who made man in His own image can renew him in that image after His Son's likeness.

And shall it not be a comfort to the true Christian, sorely vexed by the experience, and more sorely tried by the observation, of a world thus perverted, to look forward to the arrival of that time when the ways of God shall be finally justified to the universe? How does it become us to see that we ourselves be not adding to the confusion; be not introducing fresh discords into the Babel of a fallen world! Although *the restoration of all things* is not yet; although no efforts and no prayers of ours can make *the wicked* here *cease from troubling*, or lull the suffering world into a repose which belongs not to time; yet let us remember that

there is a restitution, there is a reparation, there is a reconstruction, which belongs all to time; a repentance and a conversion which, if not realized here, can be realized nowhere; a renewal of soul, and an amendment of life, under the sweet and powerful influence of the Holy Spirit, which is the condition of our ever being admitted into the world in which dwelleth only righteousness! It is easy for us to dream a poet's dream of sweet pastures, and sunny fountains, and white-robed companies, and harpers harping with their harps; it is easy to picture to ourselves a scene of freedom and innocence and happiness, in which cruelty and lust, sin and sorrow, are names unknown: but these things are altogether apart from the work, in soul and body, of men and women living this life as it is, traversing the waste and howling wilderness towards a rest which remains hereafter for the people of God. If we would ever enter heaven, we must begin it here. If we would ever see the restoration of all things, we must struggle day by day here for our own. We are very far gone from an original righteousness: we have lost the bright and clear mark, as in the forehead, of the Divine likeness: we have within us many a dangerous, many a fatal seed

of disease: we have formed in ourselves, or suffered, many a habit, in thought and word, in act and will, most opposite to the Spirit's teaching, most opposite to the Saviour's example: these things must be got rid of, must be displaced, must be reversed, by honest, humble, secret efforts, made day by day in God's strength, and renewed day by day, after failure and defeat, through God's longsuffering grace, if we would ever know what it is to cross the great gulf between saved and lost, or to have our part in the glorious *manifestation of the sons of God.*

God give us all grace to set ourselves earnestly to this task! He who calls us is faithful, and He also will do it! Where He bids us go, He leads: He prevents with His Spirit, He follows with His blessing. To Him let us commit ourselves; to the Father, to the Saviour, to the Spirit! What we know not now, He will teach; where we mistake, He will pity; when we stray, He will bring us back. Only resist Him not. Say not to Him, your one Friend, *Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for Thee:* but rather pray Him to remain with you henceforth, till your change come: yea, say of Him

as He hath taught you, *This God is our God for ever and ever: He shall be our guide unto death;* unto death, and through death, and after death, through the years which have no number, through the life which knows no ending.

LECTURE VIII.

THE GOSPEL BLESSING.

ACTS III. 26.

Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.

ST PETER is accounting for a great miracle. A man well known by sight and name to the inhabitants of Jerusalem; a man crippled from his birth, and supported from day to day by the charity of persons visiting the Temple; had suddenly risen, at the command of two of the Apostles, in the fulness of health and activity.

Men say that miracles are not the most convincing proofs of Revelation. We often hear that inward evidences are more satisfactory to the mind of this age than outward. And we are sometimes tauntingly reminded of

those extraordinary phenomena of Animal Magnetism, which have convinced so many intelligent observers, and of which perhaps no intelligent observer ought to deny the truth. But does any amount of proof, however convincing or unanswerable, make those phenomena into miracles? Wonders, marvels, prodigies, they may be: but a miracle (in the Christian sense) is a sign of something; not a mere portent, but a portent pointing to something, attesting something, calling men to believe something, to do something, to believe in some One, and to give themselves to His service. These wonders, if proved, must be accepted: the judgment, if it cannot doubt their truth, must admit them among other facts, and wait to see what place God designs them to fill among the experiences or among the endowments or among the responsibilities of His creatures. But they do not therefore either weaken the force or divide the interest of the great miracles of the Gospel. We have much, no doubt, still to learn as to the connection between mind and matter, between the soul and the body, between the world of spirit and the world of sense. And every new thing which we learn concerning these things must be tested in the

common way by evidence, and not necessarily suspected as an enemy to religion or to Christ. But how different from the most marvellous of these new fragments of discovery, is the smallest and least striking of the miracles which attested the Gospel! They were distinctly wrought in proof of the Messiahship and of the Divinity of Jesus. Each one of them was an appeal to God's Omnipotence to give testimony to the truth of His Son's mission and Gospel. And if the God of truth, the God who hates a lie, the God who abhors and unmasks imposture, gave that attestation; if He exercised a superhuman and supernatural power at the prayer of one who invoked it in the name of Jesus Christ; what beholder could fail to draw the inference that the revelation thus attested was true, or to thank God for planting that revelation on the rock of demonstrated fact, instead of leaving it for the disputations of the wise or the speculations of the sceptic?

The Gospel was designed for all men; for the poor and ignorant many, as well as for the widely read and profoundly thoughtful. And it suits that character, that its first evidences should have been evidences of sight and

sense. We may value more highly evidences of a different kind: we may be more struck by the adaptation of the Gospel to human want, or by its transforming effect upon human characters and human lives. We may feel that it has an echo within, which satisfies us beyond all contradiction that its voice is the voice of the Creator. And we do well to treasure up these evidences, every one of them, against that *cloudy and dark day* when any one of us may want them all. But let us not be so unthankful as to disparage that first evidence of power; of a power above man's, exercised upon that part of man of which the senses can take cognizance; which the miracles of the Gospels and of the Acts present to us. Let us admit indeed that a religion of power only would be a poor religion for a world of fallen men. Let us place side by side with the power the wisdom also and the holiness and the beneficence of Christ. Let us not disunite what God has joined, or lay the whole stress of our faith upon what is but a part and not the whole of God's demonstration. Yet let us all, let the poor and humble amongst us more especially, thank God for what He has vouchsafed to us in this evidence of miracle and of out-

ward sign. Let us place ourselves, in thought, amongst the multitude who looked on here upon the man that was healed, and recognized in the erect and vigorous form before them the suffering and decrepit figure which had long lain for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. Yes, my brethren, we should all have been glad of that demonstration of the Gospel: we may all be glad of it still, as it lies here before us in the simple history of the first days of Christianity.

This was the text of St Peter's Sermon: well may it be also sometimes the text of ours. Here is a fact before you: how do you account for it? St Peter says that it is easily accounted for. Believe that God raised up His Son Jesus: believe that what Jesus said was true, and that what Jesus did He did as God's Christ: and all is intelligible, all is consistent, all is natural, at once. Did not your own Prophets foretell of these things? What has been from the first the burden of all Prophecy? Has it not been the announcement of a new scene, a new order of things, which should harmonize the confusions of the world, and redress the inequalities of time? And has not the promise of this coming age of refresh-

ing and restitution been ever associated in holy Scripture with the person, the suffering, and the exaltation of a Saviour? Thus it was that, in the earliest days of our nation, the great Lawgiver of the first Dispensation was instructed to foretell the coming of One greater and mightier than himself. Moses himself said, *A Prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you from among your brethren, as* He first raised *me: Him shall ye hear according to all things whatsoever He shall say unto you. And it shall be, that every soul which shall not hear that Prophet shall be destroyed from among the people.* It was thus that God calmed the fears of the nation, as it stood trembling before that visible mountain which quaked and burned with His manifested presence. The prayer was, *Let not God speak with us, lest we die.* The answer was, The day is come, saith the Lord, when One shall come to speak with you, in whom the terrors of Deity shall be exchanged for the sympathies of humanity; yea, in whom God and Man shall so meet together and be at one, that the fallen race may both trust Him without presumption and worship Him without fear.

Yea, and all the prophets, from Samuel

and those who follow in order—from the very beginning of the prophetic succession to its close—*as many as spoke, also announced these days.* Even those of the Prophets in whose writings there occurs no direct prediction of the Messiah, yet bore a general testimony to the work and counsels of God; pointed onwards to a time, nearer or more distant, of refreshing and restitution; and kept alive in men's hearts, through the darkest night of doubt and sorrow, a sure faith in God's purpose to repair the breaches of His earthly house, and to heal the stroke of His people's wound. Even these more general predictions gave testimony to the plan of His grace. Even they told of reparation after ruin, and thus echoed the primeval declaration of a salvation to be perfected through suffering: *It shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

And ye whom I now address, men of Israel, children of the stock of Abraham, *ye are the sons of the prophets and of the disposition* (*dispensation*) *which God made toward your fathers, saying to Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.* You have entered, by God's Providence, into the inheritance of those blessings which Prophets

and righteous men of old foretold and longed after; even of that great comprehensive promise made to the father of the faithful, that in One who should be born of his seed according to the flesh, not one nation only, but all the families of the earth, should find their rest and happiness and blessing.

To you first God, having raised up His Servant, sent Him forth blessing you in the turning away each one from your iniquities.

To you first. Among all nations, was our Lord's parting commission, *beginning at Jerusalem. It was necessary,* said Paul and Barnabas to the Jews at Antioch in Pisidia, *that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. To you first:* if you refuse it, then to the Gentiles.

Having raised up. It is the same word as in the 22nd verse: *A Prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you,* &c. It expresses the whole work of preparing, equipping, and presenting, by which a Saviour or Deliverer is made available for and introduced into His mission. But more especially may it be understood of that raising up from death, by

which our Saviour passed into the fulness of His Messiahship and of His Priesthood. Not until He had died and risen and ascended, was He the full and perfect Saviour of fallen and sinful man.

Sent Him forth. Not only or chiefly during His earthly life and personal ministry below; but rather as He now goes forth, in His Word, by His ministers, and by His Holy Spirit, upon the work of converting sinners and building up those who believe. The mission began on earth, in His teaching and in His example: but it continues still, in the exercise of all those offices of intercession, mediation, and Divine grace, by which the risen Saviour gives efficacy to His Gospel, and in the results of which, as it is written, He *sees of the travail of His soul, and is satisfied.*

Sent Him forth *blessing you.* The word is borrowed from the promise made to Abraham, *In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. To bless* is properly *to speak well of, to pronounce good upon* another. But, when God blesses, it is more than speaking well; more than pronouncing good: the word of God is with power; and along with the word goes also the act of communicating good. *To speak*

good of is also, in God, *to do good to.* That then is the mission of Christ, as it is exercised now from heaven. God sends Him forth blessing men. And that blessing is not a mere word of commendation or satisfaction: it is an act, it is a power, also. God sends Him forth communicating as well as speaking good.

And to complete the exposition of the text, we must ask also, How? how does Christ bless? how does He communicate good? And the answer is, *In the turning away each one of you from your iniquities.* That is how Christ speaks good of us, which is, in other words, does good, communicates good, to us.

Such is our word of exhortation for this time. Let us ponder together the account here given us of Christ's work, and of God's work in Christ.

1. For that will be our first remark; that the work is not described only as Christ's, but rather as God's work in Christ. We are too ready to make a difference between God and Christ; to think of God (it may be) as all justice, and of Christ as all love. In past days men have used a loose and unscriptural language about Christ's calming God's wrath; Christ interposing between God the Judge of all and

man the sinner. That is not Scriptural, and therefore not true or wholesome language. I hope there is less of it now than there once was. The language of Scripture is always this: *God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son. God loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.* Let us hold fast that language. We all need it. *God having raised up His Son* (or rather, *His Servant*) *sent Him to bless you. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. What things soever the Father doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.* What things soever the Son doeth, these also doeth the Father likewise. There is but one will; there is but one work: the Father raised up the Son, and sent Him to bless you. Never run away from God, but ever seek Him and see Him in the Son.

2. Again, observe that Christ, already raised from the dead, has a mission to us. God, after raising Him up, sends Him to bless us. There is no thought more delightful, when we ponder it, than that of the mission of Christ as He now is in heaven; of His having an errand, an apostleship (as we might render it), still towards us. It is thus that in the

Epistle to the Hebrews Christians are addressed as *partakers of a heavenly calling*, and desired to *consider the Apostle as well as the High Priest of their profession, Christ Jesus.* We are all called to from heaven: that is the meaning of *partakers of a heavenly calling.* We are all like Saul of Tarsus when Jesus Christ spoke to him suddenly from heaven, asking why he resisted Him, and then promising him direction as to what he should do. That is what Jesus Christ, in a less visible and audible way, is doing at this moment to each of us. He is calling to us. In His Word, by His minister, in conscience, yes, I trust, by His Spirit also. And then, as we recognize this truth, we are told also to fix our thoughts upon Him as *the Apostle of our profession* (or *confession*); that is, as One whom our common faith teaches us to regard as having a mission to us. God has sent, is sending, Him to us, with a message, with an errand, with a commission, addressed to each one of us separately. Surely there is great force, and great beauty, and great attractiveness, in this view of Christ. It is a personal, an individual view of Christ. *Every one of you,* the text says: not a vague, general, pro-

miscuous mission, but a direct and a separate and a single one to each. God sends Jesus Christ to you, and to you, and to you. You are not lost in a crowd. The time and the place and the circumstances of your being were all prearranged and foreordained for you; and the mission of Jesus Christ to you is addressed and adapted to your particular case and need. If this be so, *how*, how indeed, *shall we escape, if we neglect so great* (because so minute and so personal) *a salvation?*

3. And, once more, a mission of what sort? an apostleship of what form and kind? Is the mission of Christ to us that of One who comes from the dead to appal and to terrify? the apparition of a reprover and a prophet of evil? Hear the word of the text: *sent Him to bless you;* to speak well of you; to declare good to you; and in the very act of doing so, to communicate the good of which He tells. Is not this the very notion of a Gospel? A Gospel is joyful tidings. It is not a threatening, it is not a reproof, it is not even a condition of acceptance, or a rule of duty: it does not say, like the Law, *Do this, and thou shalt live:* its essential character is that of an announcement; tidings of something done,

already done; the good news of some change which God has made in our state and in our prospects. Let us learn to see this in the Gospel; to see this as the essence of the Gospel: that it is not, in the first instance, a command, or a law, or a revelation of duty, but an announcement of something on God's behalf. And what is that something? Surely this: that God forgives us: whatsoever we are, He forgives us; forgives us freely, and bids us to believe ourselves forgiven, through the merits and mediation of His own beloved Son. That is the *blessing* which is Christ's mission. It is the speaking well of us; not as we are in ourselves, not as we ever shall be in ourselves, or in our own attainments in grace, but as persons who are so happy as to be forgiven freely; persons whose state is made delightful, after being most wretched, because God has *blotted out the handwriting* of condemnation *which was against us,* and has *taken it out of the way, nailing it to Christ's cross.* My brethren, the longer we live, the more firmly shall we be persuaded of the appropriateness of this alone Gospel to the state and need of man. It is not the form in which man would have framed his Gospel: he would

have thought it dangerous—he often has thought it dangerous—to begin with mercy before judgment. *But wisdom is justified by her children:* and *he that is of God heareth God's words. God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him* not to curse but *to bless;* sent Him *not to judge the world but to save.*

4. But, finally, how is this mission of blessing made effectual? Is it a flattering of human vanity? Is it a lulling of human indolence? Is it the intelligence that God has forgiven and that therefore man may lie asleep in his sins? Is it the announcement that, *where sin abounded, grace did much more abound,* and that therefore *we may continue in sin* if only to swell the triumphs of Divine grace? None of these things. *Sent Him to bless you*—to speak good of you, and to do you good—*in turning away each one of you from his iniquities.* Does this description of Christ's work seem to militate against the former? Does any one say, Then, after all, the Gospel is a law: it is only the old story once again, You must be holy, and then God will save? O the ignorance and the hardness of these hearts of ours! Is there no difference between working for forgiveness and working from forgiveness?

Is there no difference, real and practical, between being holy because we are loved, and being holy that we may be loved? Is there no difference, once again, between the being commanded to turn ourselves from our sins, and the being blessed by finding ourselves turned from them by another? Your own hearts tell you that there is all the difference! Which of us knows not something of the force of gratitude? Which of us has not felt that it is one thing to please a person as a duty, and another to please a person out of love? Which of us has not known the strange, the irresistible effect of a word of kindness, of a simple unstudied act of affection, from one whom we are conscious that we have injured? how it sometimes rolls away the whole barrier between us and him, makes us ashamed of our ill-temper, and (as St Paul says) heaps coals of fire upon our head? Even thus is it with the man whom God has forgiven; the man whom God visited when he was dead in his sins, and made him feel the full force of those words of blessing, *The Lord hath put away thy sin: thy sins are forgiven thee.* How did that man begin to enquire, *What reward can I give unto the Lord for all*

His benefits that He hath done unto me? and answer himself, saying, *I will receive the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord:* yea, I will love much, having been much forgiven!

But there may be some here present, who cannot understand the connection of the words, *Sent him to bless you,* with the words, *in turning away each one of you from his iniquities.* They may be saying, I know that my sins are wrong; and I can understand being required to part with them: but how can it be a blessing to give up this pleasant thing which sin is to me? That is, I well know, the honest though sad answer of some hearts this day. They think their sin is their happiness: at all events, they think they can have no other happiness. They count over to themselves the dull and toilsome hours of resistance, through which alone, they think, they can pass to victory; and they honestly confess that they are not equal to the effort: they are sorry for it, but it is so. O, my friend! let the question enter your heart to-night, *Does your sin make you happy?* Have you found the pleasure of sinning as great as its anticipation? Have you found the morning after sinning a bright and

pleasant awakening? Have you never known what it was to curse the fetter which bound you, and to long (even without hoping) to be free? Have you not sometimes looked back upon a past and now unattractive sin with bitter remorse, with astonishment at your own infatuation? Then that experience has shown you what it would be to look back upon all sin, upon a life of sin, from a world where it will be too late ever to repent. A thing which has all these marks of misery upon it cannot be happiness. If there is any power or any Person, in earth or in heaven, who can set us free from this influence before it is too late, the coming of that power or that Person may indeed be said to be a blessing. Cost us what it may, it will be a blessing if it succeeds. And when that victory is wrought wholly through the power of love; through an assurance of free forgiveness; through the agency of an inward influence as sweet as it is constraining; how much more may it be so regarded! God grant that each one of us may know it for ourselves! God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sends Him to bless us, in turning away, not the world generally, but every one of us individually, from our iniquities.

Let Him bless us! While others say of their sin, *When shall I awake? I will seek it yet again;* let our language be, *Thou of whose only gift it cometh that any man turns from his sin and is saved, O God, our own God, give us thy blessing!*

LECTURE IX.

THE FIRST TRIAL.

ACTS IV. 19, 20.

Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.

For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

THE two Apostles were still speaking to the people in Solomon's porch, when a forcible interruption occurred on the part of the national authorities. *The priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees, came upon them, being indignant because of their teaching the people, and announcing in Jesus,* in the case of Jesus, *the resurrection from among the dead.* It is again, as it was in their Master's case, a Jewish persecution. Even *the captain of the temple* was a Jewish, not a Roman, officer.

The servant is not greater than the Lord. They who had despised and rejected the Lord, they who by the help of Gentile hands had wrought His death, will also hate and oppress the servant. So had He foretold, and now we are to find it true.

The immediate cause is given in the words, *And the Sadducees.* It appears from the following chapter that that sect was at this time dominant. And a sect which denied the resurrection, a sect of sceptics and materialists, was likely to resent a doctrine, and still more a fact, which contradicted their views on a point so vital. The announcement of the resurrection even as a doctrine was offensive to them: but when the resurrection was announced (as it is here written) *in the case of Jesus,* announced as a fact which had already received its accomplishment, we can still less wonder at their rage and violence. *They laid their hands upon them, and got them placed in custody until the next day: for it was already evening.* The Apostles had come up to the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon: it was now, we may suppose, approaching sunset; and the night must intervene before their trial.

These are the same men who, but two months earlier, had been unable to stand their ground against the ridicule of a few maid-servants; the same men who had forsaken their Master and fled at the first approach of violence even to Him. Now they are bold to suffer for the truth's sake. *Out of weakness* they have been *made strong*. How do you account for this change? Men do not undergo rapid transformations of character by mere chance or by mere progress of time. How was it in this instance? If the Word of God is true, all is intelligible. They had in the interval received the Holy Ghost. They had been (according to their Lord's most true saying) *baptized with the Holy Ghost* ten days after His departure. The Christian can account for the change well enough. It is for the unbeliever to find where he can another and a better reason.

Though the two Apostles are in prison, *The word of God is not* therefore *bound*. *Many of those who had heard the word believed:* St Peter's second discourse, like the former, had brought in a large harvest of conviction and conversion: *and the number of the men was become about five thousand.* In the 1st chapter,

the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty. In the 2nd chapter, *there were added unto them* in one day *about three thousand souls.* In the 4th chapter, *the number of the men* is already *about five thousand.* Wonderful tokens of the force of truth! Where is there anything corresponding to this progress of the Gospel now? And, if not—it is a grave and personal question—where shall we seek the cause?

Now we have to read of the first trial of the Christians; the first instance—and not the last—of that experience concerning which the same Apostle St Peter afterwards wrote, *Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.* He who thus wrote had first acted; had first suffered himself as a Christian.

It came to pass that on the morrow there were gathered together, of them (the Jewish enemies of the Gospel), *the rulers, and the elders, and the scribes, in Jerusalem; and Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the high priest's family; and having set them* (the two Apostles) *in the midst* of the judicial circle, *they enquired, In what power,*

by the exercise of what sort of power, *or in what name,* in virtue of whose authority or commission, *did ye do this?* There is an emphasis: *ye,* two common men; ye, despised Galileans; ye, followers of a crucified Nazarene; how did ye get the power, whence did ye derive the commission, to work such a miracle? The fact was patent, and could not be challenged. But how and whence did ye derive the power?

Annas is spoken of as the high priest, whereas in the 18th chapter of St John's Gospel that title is given to Caiaphas. Annas is said to have been deposed by the Roman government, but still perhaps recognized by a part at least of the Jewish nation; so that the title of high priest might be given indifferently to his son-in-law and to himself.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost—not in His habitual indwelling only, but by a special communication for the emergency now arisen; according to the Lord's most true promise, *The Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say*—Peter, thus *filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Rulers of the people, and elders of Israel, if we this day are examined with regard to a*

benefit of (done to) *an infirm man, in whom,* by whose power or authority, *he has been saved,* rescued, that is, from his long suffering; *be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from among the dead, even in Him doth this man stand here before you sound. This is the stone,* Christ Himself is the stone spoken of in the 118th Psalm, *which was set at nought,* made nothing of, despised and thought worthless, *by you the builders* there described, *which became unto* (was made) *the head of a corner,* the prominent and conspicuous feature in one of the principal angles of the building. That stone of which the Psalmist wrote, in your own Scriptures, as taken up and thrown aside by the builders as unworthy of being used at all in their work, but afterwards exalted into the foremost and most signal position of the whole building, that stone is Christ. He it was who came to His own, to be by them despised and rejected, but whom God has exalted as the Head over all things to the Church, yea, as the Possessor of all power in heaven and in earth, as King of kings and Lord of lords. *And there is not in any other that salvation*

for which we look: *for neither is there another name under heaven, which hath been given among men, in which we must be saved.*

Such was the defence; brief, bold, and earnest. Impressive in itself, it was made yet more so by the position of the speaker. *Observing the boldness* (in speech) *of Peter and John, and finding that they were persons illiterate and ignorant, they marvelled, and recognized them,* if only by this very sign—by this combination of boldness of speech with humility of position—*that they were* (*as having been*) *with Jesus*, as His followers and His disciples. Of Him in like manner we read in St John's Gospel, that, when He *went up into the temple, and taught, the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?* To be able to speak, with force and freedom, without an education, was a coincidence between Him and them which at once suggested the thought of connection and companionship. They recognized them as having been with Jesus.

It was not without embarrassment that they could deal with this case. On the one side, there was, as they would persuade themselves, a dangerous error; dangerous at least to their

authority as masters in Israel. On the other side, there was an unquestioned fact: *seeing the man that had been healed*, and whose case was so notorious, no longer lying at the temple gate, but *standing* erect *with them* (the Apostles), *they could say nothing against it.* So *they commanded them to depart*, or *go aside, out of the council, and conferred with each other, saying, What must we do in regard to these men? for that a known sign*, a notorious miracle, *has come to pass through them* (*by their means*) *is manifest to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it: but that it* (the mischief) *may not be spread further among the people, let us strongly threaten them to speak no longer to any man on the strength of this name. And they called them, and charged them not to speak* (*utter a sound*) *at all nor teach on the strength of the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, judge ye;* we leave you to judge: *for we are not able not to speak*—we, for our part, cannot refrain from speaking—*things which we saw and heard.* Those things of which our own eyes and ears were witnesses, we could not, even if we would, conceal.

Such grace was given to the first believers and champions of the faith in Christ. Their example, and their language, is in many respects most instructive.

1. First of all, we must observe, whether the fact be welcome to us or unwelcome, in what light the Apostles placed the offer of life which is in Christ Jesus. *Neither is there salvation in any other.* It is coming to be said, as well as thought, among Christian people, that the Gospel is at most but the highest and best of many forms of truth; that for those who can receive it it is well, it is perhaps best of all; but that those who cannot receive it may yet find an alternative both of rest and safety. And indeed, my brethren, it is no duty, but the very contrary, to spend our time in denouncing those who hear not or receive not Christ's Gospel. With ourselves is our concern. Those whom the sound of Christ's call has never reached; men who lived and died before His coming, or who in these days are as ignorant of His very name as if He had never come or never risen; must indeed be left—and well may they be left—under the shelter of that all-embracing assurance, *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*

We must not set ourselves in His judgment-seat, or presume to say more than that whatever is just He will do. Nor need we discuss the case, generally or individually, of those who have heard Christ's name, have appeared to seek after truth, and yet have never accepted the truth as it is in Him. There are doubtless malformations of mind as of body: disease has no law: again we say, There is One that knoweth and judgeth. But we dare not, as believers in Revelation, dispute or evade this certain fact; that Christ Himself, and His Apostles taught by His Spirit, declare that the Gospel is not one of many revelations, but the one and final revelation, of God's will and of God's truth; that, wherever the Gospel comes, *he that believeth is saved,* and on him that believeth not *the wrath of God abides;* in other words, that there is no salvation in any other save in Christ only. We are in danger of washing out the colour, and removing the landmarks, of Christianity, until it shall become impossible for any man to say why or even whence it came. We are in danger of so diluting the strength, and so softening the terms, of the faith once delivered to the saints, as to fall into that grave error, which

our Church Article expressly condemns, of *presuming to say, that every man shall be saved by the law or sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that law and the light of nature.* I fear that this has come to be the doctrine, or at least the feeling, of many members and even of some ministers of our own Church. And for ourselves, do we not all need the full stringency, the deep solemnity, of that truth which St Peter here enunciates before the Jewish council, *Neither is there salvation in any other?* For us, at all events, it is true. If we put away from us the Gospel offer, *to whom* else *shall we go?* If we cannot satisfy ourselves of Christ's mission or of Christ's work, where shall we find a hope strong enough to live by, firm enough to die upon? This is not a congregation of sceptics or philosophers, whose very learning forms a stumblingblock in the way of their believing: we are plain men; we are not embarrassed by the subtleties which destroy the faith or poison the happiness of some: and I do say, that, if *we* are not Christians indeed, if we are dallying with Christ, if we are unconvinced and unconverted, *halting* still and to halt *between two opinions* on the vital truths of the Gospel,

it is not because of its deficient evidences, it is not because it satisfies not our reason or commends not itself to the soul within, but it is because we are lying asleep in sin, it is because we are trifling, it is because we have other guests within and do not choose to dispossess them for the Saviour, it is because we are not yet convinced of the solemnity of life, or the fearful importance of the four words, judgment and eternity, hell and heaven. If St Peter's words could but be made audible in the depth of our hearts this night, *There is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved,* there would be hope, there would be life, for us yet!

2. Again, we would leave with you those striking words, *They took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus.* They saw the boldness of Peter and John in their testimony for the truth; they found that they were unlearned and common men; and the strangeness of that combination seems to have reminded them of their Master; they recognized them, by this sign, as having been with Jesus. What a word is this for the time that is; for us, high and low, who are here assembled! There is

not a man, or a woman, or a child, in this congregation, who may not be a witness for Christ in the selfsame manner. But most of all, the poorest; most of all, the youngest; most of all, the most ignorant and the most unlearned. Let men see you manful in your confession of Christ, let them see that you are not ashamed of Him; let them see that you claim and find the fulfilment of your Master's promise, that in every season of difficulty the Holy Ghost shall open your lips in courage and in wisdom; and assuredly they will know—for in this respect God never leaves Himself without witness—where you have been and in whose presence: the very *skin of the face* will *shine,* as of old in the Prophet and Lawgiver of Israel, from that heavenly converse, and men shall take knowledge of you, alike by your meekness and by your boldness, that you have been with Jesus. Thus, not least, is His name made known below, His saving health among the fallen and the sinful.

3. Finally, let the words of the text itself speak to us in all their power, and become to us more and more the rule and guide of life. It has never happened to one of us to stand, as these Apostles stood, at the bar of an earthly

judge, and be forbidden to speak at all in the name of Jesus. But there is a tribunal before which we are always standing; a tribunal below, and a tribunal above. The tribunal below is that of the world, whatever our world be; the tribunal of public opinion, in whatever way, or within whatever limits, public opinion acts for us. Those limits may be extremely narrow. There are those, possibly, here present, who know no human judgment-seat, practically, out of their own doors. The censure which we dread is oftentimes little more than that of brother or sister, wife or husband, parent or child. Our trial may be conducted entirely within the four walls of a parlour or a kitchen: no more formidable authority is that to which we are practically amenable. But which of us knows not, that, if this be all, there is a wonderful force and power in it? Many a life is lived day by day under a prohibition like that laid upon the two Apostles; Whether the Gospel be true or false, is not the question; whether Christ ever died and rose, whether Christ will ever judge, I care not; but this I say, You shall not speak to me or before me in Christ's name: I will not have the subject of religion mentioned in my hearing; nor will

I suffer anything to be done in this house on the supposition that Christ lives and reigns, that Christ has commanded or that Christ will punish. That, when framed into words, is the condition of peace and quietness in many homes. That, when framed into words, is, more than we would willingly confess, the stipulation of much that is called society. We do not ask whether the Gospel be true: all we say is, the Gospel shall not be brought in here. Now you see from the example before us what we ought to be able to say in answer; what we ought to be able to act upon in the face of this prescription. *Whether it be right in the sight of God, to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye: for we cannot but speak the things which we heard and saw.* Would to God that we could all speak thus decidedly as to the grounds of our own faith! Would that we could all say and all feel that in believing in Christ we are following no cunningly devised fable, but simply accepting truth on the evidence of fact! *That which was from the beginning,* says the same Apostle St John, *which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life...that*

which we have seen and heard declare we unto you. If this Gospel be thus proved and thus true, ought we not to confess it—not only when we meet to worship, but in daily life and daily speech? O for that spirit which breathed in the Apostles, when they said, We *cannot but speak!* They meant surely, Our hearts are full of these things, and they will utter them: if we would suppress, if we would conceal, if we would be silent, we could not! This is the faith which does Christ honour. This is the faith which makes converts. Not that cold calculating principle, which makes a dry and formal mention, in places and companies most unsuitable, of the words and phrases of the Bible; but rather that overflowing of the abundance of the heart, which is all natural, all genial, at once brave and modest, at once serious and cheerful, at once elevating and human. Yes, my brethren, in this as in all else we must begin at the source: out of the heart are the issues of life: first know Christ as your Saviour, and then let the light that is within shine forth into that which is without also.

There is a tribunal below: and there is another tribunal above. And these are con-

trary the one to the other—so that he who would satisfy both cannot! The one is seen and temporal; the other unseen but eternal. Who can doubt which of the two we ought to live for? Who, when the question is stated in words, would fail to reply, *We ought to obey God rather than man.* It cannot be right to hearken unto you more than unto God. And many of us, I doubt not, if sinners would entice them to an act of open wickedness, or if scoffers would draw them into a direct denial of their Saviour, would have courage enough to give that answer. But not thus most often does the question reach us: not thus most often is the question answered. Not thus: but rather in a thousand demands for little daily compromises, no one of which seems of itself to touch the main issue between hearkening to the world and hearkening to God. The trial is ever proceeding; never, in this world, decided. Yet is it, in reality, for life or for death; and one day we shall all hear the verdict. God give us in that day a safe deliverance; that, having confessed Him here, He may confess us there, and make us glad for ever with the joy of His countenance!

LECTURE X.

PRIMITIVE WORSHIP.

ACTS IV. 31.

And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together: and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.

How far more perplexing, if we knew all, is the path of the sinner than the path of the just! If it is sometimes difficult, and sometimes dangerous, to serve God, yet, on the whole, it is a saving of trouble to have a single aim in life, and that single aim the right one. If once our question can become, What is true? and what is right? we avoid a thousand intricacies and a thousand embarrassments to which the worldly-minded and the double-minded are perpetually liable.

Mark the conduct of the Jewish rulers as it is set before us in the narrative last dwelt upon. They did not care to enquire whether by any possibility the disciples might be in the right; they did not attempt to dispute the fact of the recent miracle, nor to explain that fact on any hypothesis of their own: they only knew that their own authority depended upon upholding an existing system, and that a great sacrifice must be made if they would admit the Gospel to be true. And therefore they determined not to admit the Gospel to be true. At all costs they would prop the present system.

But even this required caution. The people—the plain common men, who, when He was upon earth, had heard Jesus gladly—were all glorifying God for the miracle of healing which they had witnessed. Any punishment inflicted upon the Apostles would be unwelcome and unpopular. Thus the course of persecution itself by no means ran smooth. They might say, but they could not do: they might threaten, but they could not punish. They called the Apostles in, and charged them not to open their lips in the name of Jesus. And even the manful words of the two Apostles, leaving them to judge whether it could be right in God's sight to

hearken to them more than to God, produced no impression: they only *further threatened them*, and then *let them go, finding no means of punishing them, because of the people.*

My brethren, if we would be happy men, or consistent men, or (in the long run) respected men, we must seek and love the truth. We must not ask, What is convenient? or what is advantageous? or what is popular? but, What is right? We must not say, I have a suspicion that there is something in this, but I dare not go through with it: or, I should like to do this or that, but I am afraid of what will be thought of it. We must simply ask, Does this commend itself to my judgment? is this ratified by my conscience? is this God's word or God's will? and then go boldly forward, assured that side-looks and by-ends and crooked paths are as miserable as they are wrong, and that, while *they who love God's law have great peace, they that run after another God shall have great trouble.*

Set in contrast with the half-measures and paltry misgivings of these scribes and elders, the noble courage and perfect peace of the now discharged and enfranchised prisoners.

Being released, they came to their own, to

the other Apostles and Christians who were awaiting the issue of the imprisonment, *and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.* The questions asked, the charges laid upon them, the threatenings added in case of disobedience, all were rehearsed in this friendly audience: and with what result? Was the question debated, whether, under circumstances so adverse, they could go forwards? Was anything said of *forsaking Christ and fleeing,* as they had done when He was Himself led to His trial? Was it proposed to enter into any compromise, such as that of leaving the city and carrying their new doctrine among the Gentiles? None of these things. Listen.

And they, when they heard, heard that danger was before them, heard that preaching was forbidden, heard that punishment would follow upon persistence, *with one accord lifted up their voice to God,* turned to Him in their peril, called to Him in their difficulty, confided to Him their anxieties and their distresses—yes, but in what tone? in the tone of fear and despondency, of misgiving and alarm? Listen once again. *They lifted up their voice with one accord to God, and said, Lord*—it is that word which expresses absolute ownership and sovereignty; the word by

which a slave addresses his master, and the subject his sovereign; as though to remind themselves of that entire right and dominion over them which is the surest pledge of concern and guardianship—*Lord, Thou art He who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and all things that are in them;* all the creatures, rational or irrational, which inhabit each: see how the thought of the Creator comes in to support and comfort the redeemed! *Who by the mouth of Thy servant David didst say,* as we still read it month by month in our 2nd Psalm, *Why did nations boast themselves*—it is a figure taken from the neighing of spirited high-fed horses—*and peoples meditate vain things? The kings of the earth presented themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against His Christ;* against God Himself, and against the King whom He anointed, the King of kings and Lord of lords. We see now, they say, the fulfilment of this prophecy. *For there were gathered together, in truth, in this city, against Thy holy Servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint,* whom Thou didst make Thy Christ, *both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with nations and peoples of Israel, to do all things which Thy hand and Thy counsel foreordained to come to pass.* So weak

is man when he rises against his Maker! Even what he designs for evil is overruled for good. The description of one of these Divine providences is the description of all; *As for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.* The murder of Jesus is the redemption of a world. *It shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to Thy servants with all boldness to speak Thy word, in the stretching forth of Thy hand (while Thou stretchest forth Thy hand) for healing, and (grant) that signs and wonders may come to pass through the name of Thy holy Servant Jesus.

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and all were filled with the Holy Ghost, and spake the word of God with boldness. God, at this moment of their need, gave a sensible sign of His presence: the place of assembly was shaken as by an earthquake: a new and special communication of the Holy Spirit both kindled and comforted their hearts, and they went forth, with added boldness, to the work of speaking and witnessing for God.

We have here, my brethren, an express record of a primitive meeting for worship. No doubt there was something in it of a special character. It was held at a moment of danger. The disciples were threatened with punishment if they dared to speak any more in the name of Jesus. There was that, therefore, in the circumstances of the moment, from which God's mercy has spared us. We come hither, week by week, to hear and to worship, *with all confidence, no man forbidding us.* Let us ask ourselves, Should we be here at all, were it otherwise? If we were *straitly threatened,* by the voice of the world around us, should we be bold to make answer, like these first disciples, that we *must* obey God rather than men? that we *could not but speak* and avow the things of which our heart was full? Alas! if the effect of persecution is to make the good better, the bold more bold, and the faithful more faithful, what is its effect upon the double-minded and the half-hearted? Is it not, to make them fall away entirely, and walk no more, even by profession, with Jesus? I should tremble to see the effect of that fiery trial upon this congregation. Those of us who even in quiet times, when it is respectable to be a Christian, cannot

conquer indolence, cannot forego inclination, cannot brave a smile or a sneer, in behalf of Christ; what would they do if the voice of the world turned (as it might turn) altogether against Christ; if even the profession of Christianity became a reproach? We half-Christians are afraid of one another: what should we be if the world turned against us?

If a season of excitement, like that through which these first Christians were passing, seems to us to account for the vigour and liveliness of their devotion, we ought to ask ourselves what effect such a season would have had upon *our* devotion; whether it would not have put it out and destroyed it altogether; whether even the worshippers themselves would have been forthcoming: and certainly our thanksgivings should arise to God for having spared us from so fiery a trial; for having permitted us to live in quiet times, when, if faith be less believing, and devotion less devoted, there is at least more of it; for the encouragement of the feeble, if not for the strengthening of the strong.

And then we ought to set ourselves, every one of us, to make our worship, when we assemble together in this place or elsewhere, as much like theirs as by God's grace we can.

We shall look, therefore, at a few points in the example here set us.

1. When they heard that they were likely to have to suffer for Christ, even as He, their Lord and Master had forewarned them, *they lifted up their voice to God with one accord.* Not their heart only, but their voice. One said the words, but all echoed them. Some have called this the first example of a Creed. They have seen in it one of those joint utterances of a common faith, which our Church has prescribed to us, for example, in the Apostles' Creed. *I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. Lord, Thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is.* And they have noticed that our own Church prescribes that the Creeds shall be *sung or said.* The Psalms themselves shall be *said or sung:* the Creeds shall be *sung or said;* as though the first notion of a Creed were that not of a confession of doctrine, but of a song of praise. According to this view, the first recorded worship of the Church was the singing of a Creed.

Others have seen in this specimen of primeval worship the proof of the existence of a Liturgy. They have said that, in order to

lift up their voice to God in these words, they must first have known them. We will not enter into these arguments: they at least want certainty. It will be enough for us to observe, that, while one spoke, all followed: the well-known voice of St John or St Peter led—the thoughts were the thoughts of all, the words were simple and easy of apprehension—and they who, in that age of hearing, were accustomed to think aloud; they who, even when they were alone, like the Ethiopian Eunuch, were not seen but heard reading; found no difficulty in adding *a humble voice,* as well as *a pure heart,* to the words of supplication, *accompanying* the speaker *to the throne of the heavenly grace,* and *saying* the prayer *after* him. In this elementary point let us be earnest to resemble them. If the heart is engaged, the voice will not be withheld: you will rejoice to obey the call of your Church in such rules as these, *A general Confession to be said of the whole Congregation after the Minister, all kneeling. The people shall answer here, and at the end of all other prayers, Amen. The Minister shall kneel, and say the Lord's Prayer with an audible voice; the people also kneeling, and repeating it with him, both here, and wheresoever*

else it is used in Divine Service. They lifted up their voice with one accord to God, and said.

2. And now let us look at some of the particulars of this early Christian worship, that we may endeavour to frame our own after it.

(1) It is a *reverent* worship. How profound is the adoration of God as the alone Great and Good and Holy! How solemn is the sense of that rightful sovereignty over us and all things, which breathes in the first word and in the first clause of the prayer! These men did not rush together as we do around the Divine footstool—talking, jesting, smiling, whispering—as though the visit were to an equal, or as though indeed the presence-chamber were empty. Let not such worship think that it can receive anything of the Lord. The least that can be looked for in this House of Prayer is reverence; the feeling of the sinful approaching the Sinless, the creature the Creator, the thing formed Him that formed it. Bending low before His footstool on our first entrance, let our one endeavour be to preserve, throughout, the solemnity of the opening, and to say, in manner as in word, *Lord, Thou art God!*

(2) Theirs was a *Scriptural* worship. They

quoted Scripture in it. They recognized a Divine Inspiration in the voice of man. *The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue. Who by the mouth of Thy servant David hast said.* It is not essential to prayer that it be in Scripture words, but it is essential to prayer that it be founded on Scripture doctrine. It is essential that our petitions be addressed to God as He is, and not to God as we fancy Him. And we can only know God as He is, by becoming acquainted with Him in His Word. *There is verily a fault in us* in this matter! We are prone to imagine that we know God well enough of ourselves; that at all events we know God so well already from Scripture, that we have no occasion to study Him any more. And then we shut His Word, or read it but as a form, and lo! the living and true God is gone away, and He is no more with us. A name, a shadow, a phantom, is in His place. If we would pray aright, we must ask ourselves the question, *What is written? how readest thou?*

(3) Theirs was a *believing* worship. They rose above sight and sense, and could see behind forms of flesh and blood the Hand that moves the universe. Unbelieving men would

have seen only *Herod and Pontius Pilate,* only *the Gentiles and the people of Israel,* banded together *against God and against His Christ.* They would have said, What are we against the world? That faith, that worship, that Church, which has to fight single-handed *against principalities and powers* in earthly and *in heavenly places,* what chance, what hope, has it? But their eye was not thus bounded. Behind, amidst, above, all human agency for evil, they saw the hand of God working wholly for good. The murder of Jesus, what was it? In itself, a Satanic, a diabolical act: *this is your hour, and the power of darkness:* a calamity wrought by human prejudice and passion and cruelty: a thing in which there was nothing of God; only guilt, only crime, only sin. But in its consequences, what was it? The working out of God's counsel; the revelation of God's righteousness; the redemption of a world; the restoration and salvation of fallen man. You ask, how could man's sin thus redound to God's glory? You ask a question for which the time is not yet; a question which must wait its answer till the world beyond death. But, if you urge it as a difficulty in the way of the Gospel, we answer that it is at least as much a

difficulty in the way of Providence as of Grace. God's will overruling man's will, and turning man's acts whither he would not; yet at the same time man free to will and free to act, and responsible alike for the willing and the acting; these are the conflicting elements with which we have to deal, and we must wait for their visible reconciliation in a time not yet come. Meanwhile the Christian could not live without this confidence, that all things are working together for the glory of God, and for good to them that love Him. The prayer of the Christian is a believing prayer; because he can add to every mention before God of things calamitous and evil which befall him, *For to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel determined before to be done.*

(4) Theirs was also a *practical* worship. It dealt not with feeling but with action; or, if with feeling, only in so far as right and pious feeling is the soul of holy and Christian action. If they called upon God to *behold the threatenings* of the enemy, it was in this connection; that He might grant to His servants the needful grace to stand against them. It is a great matter when our prayers have a practical object. We are too ready to let them stop with

themselves; to be satisfied if a ray of comfort, if a passing thought of peace, if a feeling of reconcilement and of affiance, is left behind them; to regard them only as soothers of the conscience or enliveners of the affections. And therefore they are this only. We *have our reward,* even as we prescribed it. But that was not the aim of the worship here before us. The worshippers of whom we here read looked to conduct, looked to duty, looked to future trials of their faith and constancy, and asked for grace sufficient to each of these. In the prospect of *affliction and persecution for the Word's sake,* they pray that they may not be offended; that faith may not fail, nor courage, nor constancy, nor energy; that they may still *speak boldly, as they ought to speak.* For this purpose, to quicken this zeal, to strengthen this devotion, they pray that God's hand may still be outstretched to heal; that He will never leave them without witness, but will give them daily proof that His holy Servant Jesus is indeed strong to help, mighty to save. My brethren, we ought in prayer to forecast the future. We ought to bethink ourselves of coming trial; and while we trust God implicitly with the unforeseen, to ask his help expressly

for that which we can see before us. One word of definite request is worth volumes of vague general aspirations. First, in itself; because it is real, because it means something; because it is the address of a living man to a living God on a topic which concerns life. And secondly, in its effects; because one thing actually granted is a proof of being heard; because it is God's own witness to His own grace; because it is a *token for good,* shown and proved, encouraging confidence in Him who is not only the Giver of single blessings, but the Fountain of all goodness, and the very source of life.

3. We have spoken of the manner of the primitive worship, and of its nature. One concluding word must be given to its effects.

An immediate sign followed it. *The place was shaken where they were gathered together.* These things are of the past. These things were suitable then, and necessary. Men looked for outward signs; and they wanted them, while the faith was young. *These signs shall follow them that believe;* and the spiritual was an inference from the sensible. In this age, there is no outward sign which scepticism could not account for: signs would not convince the infidel, and the believing ask not for them. But

has God, then, no sign for His people? Has worship no sign of its acceptance? Is there nothing now corresponding to the altar-flame which attested God's regard to man's offering? Yes, there is an inward peace following upon Divine communion: there is a glow of faith, and a comfort of love, and a joy of hope, by which *the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are sons of God.* He who seeks God with all his heart, on any occasion of worship, shall find Him, and know that he finds: he shall feel it *good for him to be here,* and he shall be sent on his way rejoicing. *Filled with the Holy Ghost,* by a conscious communication between his soul and God, he shall go forth hence to *speak the word of God with* added *boldness;* to bear a more manful and a more consistent testimony to that message of the Gospel which Jesus Christ brought down from heaven, and which He sealed with the outpouring of His most precious blood.

i. Expect, my brethren, great things from worship. Worship will be, in great measure, what you make it; what you make it in your use, what you make it in your expectation. If you look for much, you will also receive much: if you expect little, you will also reap little. *Ye*

are not straitened in God: *ye are straitened in your own* affections. *Open thy mouth wide*, He says, *and I will fill it.*

ii. Finally, carry your worshipping thoughts forth with you. Let them not be dissipated by idle words, by foolish levity, just outside or (alas! it may be) even within these walls. The great enemy will watch you after this Service, that he may *catch away* the seed sown: even *among the sons of God* (one Book of Holy Scripture tells us) he comes and goes freely: *we are not ignorant of his devices.* Look upward to Him who is greater than the evil one, and can counterwork all his wiles. Pray that the good thoughts here suggested, and the holy desires here fostered, may live in you this night, to-morrow, and through the days to come. *Desire the sincere milk of the Word,* not that ye may trifle with it, but *that ye may grow thereby. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.* Yea, may He Himself, who is the Word, so abide in us by His Spirit, that we may know Him for ourselves; first as the Life of the living, and hereafter as the Resurrection of the dead.

LECTURE XI.

THE FIRST SIN.

ACTS V. 1.

A certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife.

THERE is an old saying, *The corruption of the best is worst.* The better a thing is, the worse is its spoiling. The greater the elevation, the greater the fall.

And this is true both of profession and of reality. When a man who has talked loudly is at length unmasked as an impostor, his exposure is more terrible than if he had never affected great virtue. And when a man who has not only professed but felt the truth and power of religion is, as, alas! he may be, overtaken by the enemy and overcome, it is sometimes found that he gives himself over more entirely to the

grasp of evil, than one who had never known what it was to serve another master. *If, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world, through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning.*

Our subject this evening brings before us the first great sin committed within the Christian Church; shows us how it *took occasion* from the very devotedness and self-sacrifice of the first Christians; proves to us how very low a man may fall, who has once risen very high in Christian attainment; warns us that we must never presume upon the advantage even of Christian companionship, of being entirely surrounded by Christian characters, as a safeguard against temptation or sin; and, in short, bids us, by a very serious example, lay well to heart the Apostle's warning, *Be not high-minded but fear: Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.* We look upon this scene almost as we look upon man's original Fall: we seem to be reading of a Paradise regained, when we are suddenly shocked and startled by the narrative of a Paradise for the second time forfeited.

For what indeed can be more like a description of a Paradise below, than that which closes the last chapter and introduces this? The deep impression made by the act of worship of which we last read, was no fleeting or evanescent feeling. *The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul* (*had their heart and their soul one*): their union was not, as is too often the case now, formal and nominal; not the connection of those who with the same voice can first *bless God* and then *curse man;* can kneel together in the House of Prayer, and then go forth to dispute and wrangle, to disparage and to defame: their very heart and soul was one. *And no one said that any thing of those which belonged to him was his own, but they had all things common.* Instead of standing up for individual rights, and going to law (if need be) one with another to keep or to reclaim, they regarded all they had as belonging equally to their brethren. For a time this was so in that happy congregation: and even when the form was changed, the spirit continued. Alas! where is either the form or the spirit now?

And with great power the Apostles rendered the testimony of the resurrection of the Lord

Jesus; presented before the world *the subject of their testimony*, the thing which they had to testify, *concerning the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all;* God's favour and blessing was largely bestowed upon the whole community. And one decisive proof of this is added. *For neither was there among them any needy person:* the words express that even the charity of the Church was anticipated, as it were, by the disappearance of poverty: *there was not (beforehand) any one that lacked:* there was no room for giving, because all were supplied—in the manner next described. *For as many as were (beforehand) possessed of farms or houses sold them, and brought*, one after another, *the prices of the things sold, and laid them at the feet of the Apostles: and distribution was made to each, according as any one had need. And Joseph, who was surnamed Barnabas on the part of the Apostles; which is when interpreted, Son of encouragement;* that is, one to whom God has given by His Holy Spirit a singular power of *cheering on* others in the way of eternal life; *a Levite, a Cyprian by family;* one descended from the tribe of Levi, but whose family lived in the island of Cyprus; *having land belonging*

to him, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the feet of the Apostles. There was an example of a genuine exercise of that self-devotion which has been noticed.

And now we turn to its counterfeit. We are to see how the great enemy, *while men slept, came and sowed tares among the wheat.*

But a man, Ananias by name, together with Sapphira his wife—the two acted jointly in this business—*sold a possession, and appropriated* a part *from the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the feet of the Apostles. And Peter said, Ananias, why did Satan fill thine heart, that thou shouldest deceive the Holy Spirit,* that thou shouldest lie to those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells for the very purpose of guiding and ruling the Church of God, *and that thou shouldest appropriate* a part *from the price of the farm? While it remained, remained it not for thee?* so long as it was unsold, was it not thine own? *and, when sold, was it not (from the first) in thine own authority?* There was no compulsion to sell; no rule of the Church required it: and after selling, the money got by it was liable to no dictation from the Church as to its use: all was voluntary; to sell or not to sell; to

give or not to give; to give a part or to give the whole: but not to give a part and pretend that it was the whole; not to deceive, in a matter of piety and of charity; not to treat the living and heart-searching God as if He were *even such an one* as the creatures whom He hath made. *Why* is it *that thou didst set this deed in thine heart,* give this wicked device room and lodgment within thee? *thou didst not lie to men, but to God.* The falsehood was not only to men: perhaps it was not even uttered in words: but it was a lie in God's sight, and it had special relation to God's matters.

And Ananias, as he heard these words, fell down, and gave up the ghost: and there came great fear upon all who heard; upon all who were present and heard that which passed. *And the younger men* present in the assembly *rose up, and wrapped him up* in his garments, *and bore him forth and buried him.*

And there was an interval of about three hours, and then *his wife, as not knowing* (*because she knew not*) *what had taken place, came in* to the place where the congregation was still assembled, in all the awe attending that terrible scene. *Peter answered her,* answered

her first word or thought of enquiry as to the scene before her or the looks with which she was received, *Tell me whether ye sold the farm for so much?* naming the sum paid in by her husband. *And she said, Yes, for so much.* She adhered to the falsehood, and made it her own. *And Peter said to her, Why* is it *that it was agreed between you to tempt the Spirit of the Lord;* to try an experiment upon the discernment, upon the penetration, of the Holy Spirit of God; to see whether He could and would unveil your hypocrisy, and visit your sin upon you? *Behold, the feet of those who buried thy husband* are *at the door, and shall bear forth thee. And she fell down instantly at his feet, and gave up the ghost: and the young men came in and found her dead, and bore her forth and buried her by her husband. And there came a great fear upon the whole of the Church, and upon all who heard these things.*

Such is the history of the first entrance of sin into the Christian community. And in reading it, observe,

1. There is such a thing as acting a falsehood. I do not read here that Ananias expressly said that the sum he brought was the whole price of his land. The question was

distinctly put to his wife, and she answered it by an express falsehood. But of Ananias we seem rather to read that he brought a certain sum, and *gave it to be understood* that that sum was the whole sum received. We have to do with a God of truth; and where truth is not, there in His sight is falsehood. We often guard and fence our words, so that they shall be just susceptible of an interpretation consistent with the fact. We often think that, if we can avoid saying the exact opposite of the truth, it is enough: we cannot be guilty of falsehood, unless in so many words we tell a direct lie. Learn then that, wherever deception is, there is falsehood. Wherever the natural inference from our words would be this or that which is not the case, there in God's sight is the sin of lying. And how many of our words are of this character; "an attempt to steer dexterously between the truth and a lie." Let us lay it well to heart that we are in the presence of One who sees and knows all things, and who will hereafter bring every word and every thought into judgment.

But, even beyond this, there may be an acted falsehood. Ananias, witnessing the honest self-devotion of others in throwing all they

possessed into the treasury of Christ, determines to win for himself the same character. He too will seem to have *counted all things but loss for Christ.* He gives it to be understood that he is parting with his land out of zeal for the Gospel. The sale is in private; but soon he appears in the congregation with the bag of gold or silver, which he takes care should be understood to be the produce, and the whole produce, of the transaction. Just as Barnabas of Cyprus brought the profits of his sale of land, so does Ananias bring his. Every one gives him credit, and he intends that they should do so, for a devotion which thinks only of things above, and a self-forgetfulness which cannot enjoy so long as others suffer. No word, it may be, is spoken: but the act itself says all this, and the doer intends that all this should be understood. It is then, in the midst of that acted lie, that the light of God's countenance is fully let in upon the secret misdeed. And terrible indeed to the hypocrite must have been that searching, that unanswerable question, *Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart, to lie unto the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.*

Alas! how much of the conduct of many of us is indeed no better than an acted lie! How much is done, to throw dust into the eyes of others as to our real motive, as to our real self! O what would become of our piety, and what would become of our charity, if God were to throw upon it, in the sight of our fellow-men, the light of His Omniscient eye? Even apart from the positive wish and purpose of deceiving, how impossible it is to give others a true and just idea of us as we are! How does confession itself turn upon our lips into self-parade and boasting! How must we all consent, whether we will or no, to go about among our fellows rather masked than open! It is so, perhaps, in mercy to others even more than to ourselves. We might draw others downwards, if they saw how low are our own attainments: we might tempt them to acquiesce in imperfections against which God would have them struggle on in hope. But, if this be so to a certain extent inevitably, let us take good heed not to multiply, not to exaggerate, and not to love, this misconception. There is all the difference, in God's sight, between him whom men will overestimate in spite of his sincerity, and him who forces men to over-

estimate him by his concealments and by his hypocrisies. God save us all from the falsehood of the tongue, and from the falsehood of the life; from the lie acted, as well as from the lie spoken!

2. What an illustration have we here of the saying of the Apostle, *The love of money is the root of all evil; which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.* What was it which made Ananias and Sapphira lie to the Holy Ghost? Was it not the lust of money? Was it not the wish to save something out of the surrender of their all to Christ? Was it not the desire, if not to get, at least to keep, a fragment of that perishable money which at the very moment they were professing to cast away? Thus it was that Ananias and Sapphira lost both worlds; even by trying to gain both! They would be pious, they would be charitable, they would serve Christ, they would do good to man: but they kept a corner in their hearts for Mammon: they trusted Christ would not notice it: they felt sure that He must be satisfied with what they gave Him? that He could not grudge that slight, that small reservation: had they not sold their all?

had they not given Him all but their all? would not that suffice? could they be blamed for making some little provision against a change of times? was it much to ask, that they might keep back just this little? Thus it was that in their hearts the little dark spot grew and spread and darkened still, until it overshadowed and at last poisoned all the rest. They lost both worlds in the very act of gaining both.

My friends, the Scripture is very full—to some of us almost unintelligibly, almost disproportionately full—of warnings about the love of money. Judas himself, the traitor Apostle, was a victim to the love of money: and O of such money! of such little, paltry, despicable sums as we should scarcely stoop to pick up! It is not the amount, which makes the attraction. There are men on earth, who will "contrive the gain of a farthing:" they like the scheming, and the ingenuity, and the adroitness, which the love of money in any shape demands and exercises: and it grows upon them till the very heart is eaten out by it.

Ananias lost life and soul together for the sake of gaining even from himself. He might have kept all: but he wanted to give all and

yet to keep back a part: and the Spirit of God found him out in doing so. I would speak with all tenderness: but is there a place in which the word of warning is more needful, or a time at which it could be more seasonable? What is it but the love of money which creates some of the most characteristic evils of a town like this? I speak not now of that honest, honourable, honoured industry in the business of a lawful calling, which is as much the duty as it ever can be the interest of a Christian. Would to God there were more amongst us of the love of money in this one Christian sense; more, I mean, of that quiet, steady plodding in the work of the shop or of the office, by which a competence, with God's blessing upon it, is gradually acquired, and handed down to those that come after! I speak, and your own hearts go along with me in speaking, of those precarious, those adventurous, those idle methods of gaining, upon which God's blessing cannot be asked, and upon which (it is scarcely an exaggeration to say) God's curse almost visibly rests. I speak of wants created by an expenditure habitually exceeding income, and supplied by the exorbitant profits of a single week in the year. I speak

of examples set to the young of unlawful ventures, by which many a life has been drawn astray from the beginning, and many a hopeful career cut short by crime and infamy. I speak of a love of gain, which has made sons indifferent to a father's command and a mother's happiness, reckless in destroying the inheritance of sisters, and at last regardless even of a country's laws and the terrors of a wrath to come. These things have been, over and over again: the records of our courts of justice are full of them: and earnestly and affectionately would I warn those who hear me—the younger part, more especially, of this congregation—of the fearful risks run by the first step into the region of chance; the first departure from that safe and pleasant path of Christian diligence and uprightness, on which alone God's blessing rests, and to which alone the promise belongs, *Keep innocency, and take heed unto the thing which is right: for that shall bring a man peace at the last.*

3. What a responsibility is involved in being brought near to God as members of His Son's Church below! Well may this be recorded as the consequence of the fate of Ananias, that *great fear came upon all the Church, and*

upon as many as heard these things. Yes, there is a reality in our connection with Christ, which must tell upon us for good or else for evil. These ordinances of which we make so light; these means of grace, these opportunities of worship; the very sacrament of Christian Baptism, in which all of us, singly and severally, have been dedicated and devoted to God through Jesus Christ; all these things have a meaning, whether we will or no, and we ourselves are *fearfully and wonderfully* concerned in it. We cannot get out of that presence. We must spend our lives, we must think our thoughts, speak our words, and do our acts, in the sight and hearing of that God who has made us His own by the gift of His Son. It is in vain that we say, *We will be as the heathen.* God has set His mark upon us; God has taken us for His people, and, either in love, or else *in fury poured out*, He must *rule over us.* I can desire nothing more for you and for myself, beloved brethren, than that this thought might be deeply graven upon our hearts. We are so light, so giddy, so trifling; or else we are so selfwilled, so presumptuous, so audacious; in either case, we are so independent of God and of His will, in our own

eyes; that it would revolutionize the very life of all of us if we could only begin to live it as in God's presence; if we could only say to ourselves, and live and move daily in the recollection of it, *I speak and act not unto men, but unto God;* my faults, my sins, are all not only open to Him, but done in relation to Him; *Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight, that Thou mightest be justified in Thy saying, and be clear when Thou judgest.* In the prospect of abounding temptations, for some of those who hear me, in the week which today opens, I could be satisfied, I could be secure, for the stability of any one who will only *set God always before him,* commit to Him his ways and his doings, and say to Him, night and day, in the sincerity of his heart, *Thou art near, O Lord: Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.*

4. Finally, let us learn by God's grace, from the history now before us, the great practical lesson, how to cast out the fear of one another by the stronger and more impressive fear of God. Ananias and Sapphira committed this great sin in the hope of purchasing to themselves the good opinion of the Christian congregation to which they belonged.

And they would have succeeded in this endeavour, but for one consideration which they left out of sight. They would have succeeded in winning the esteem of man, if they could only have kept God silent. If God would but acquiesce, if God would but keep silence, they could have done all. But God thought it necessary to show that young Church, that He was in them and among them of a truth. He saw fit to impress upon them all, by a terrible proof, the fact that He has not deserted the earth, however much the earth may set aside or forget Him. And the fearful fate of these two persons made, as it well might make, a strong and salutary impression upon the hearts of His people. They saw then that to be brought nigh to God by the blood of Christ does not imply any impunity in sinning. It does not mean that God's holiness is one whit less perfect, or His judgment one whit less strict, on account of the atonement which He has made for all sin in the sacrifice of Jesus. He who will trifle with God, he who will tempt the Holy Ghost, by continuing in sin, or by deliberately cherishing in his heart the desire of some forbidden thing, shows thereby that he is *counting the blood of the covenant, where-*

with he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and that he has *neither part nor lot* in that salvation which is as much *unto holiness* as it is all *of grace.*

And we also are daily tempted to live for the honour which comes to us from one another, and not for that honour which is of God only. When shall we begin to care more for the approval of Christ, than for the approval of men that shall die? When shall we give up this fatal habit, of asking, at each turn, What does the world say? what does the world do? my world, I mean; the world of my family, my friends, my neighbourhood; and enquire rather, Is this right? does Christ approve? if I go there, shall I be throwing myself into temptation? if I enter into this amusement, shall I not be risking the falling again into that old snare in which I was once and for so long entangled? Let me look up to Christ for direction. Let me ask Him to guide. Let the whisper of His Spirit be my voice of admonition. And let me in all things *thank the Lord for giving me warning.* Let me count it no hardship, but the highest honour, the purest joy, to have the Lord so near me, that

when I would do this, He Himself shall say to me, Do it not! Do it not—why? Because He grudges me enjoyment? because He would have me dull and spiritless and fainthearted? Nay, but because He loves me; because, giving me Himself, He gives me all; because, having shed His own blood for me, He may be trusted with my all; and because He has Himself promised me, that, where He is, there at last shall I His servant be!

May He thus draw us to Himself by the cords of a man, even by the band of love! *In His presence,* even now, *is fulness of joy.* Let us not forfeit that joy, for the sake of any other. Let us be assured that, whatever draws us another way, must be our misery. But, above all, even if we must suffer for Him; even if friends shall look coldly on us, or the whole world deride and pass us by; still it must be well with us, if we are His! May He give us grace to make that choice, and to abide by it, and to find it more and more our chief and our one happiness; so that at last we may understand all that is included in the words written of old by one in whom the Spirit of God was, *The Lord Himself is the portion of*

mine inheritance and of my cup...He is on my right hand, therefore I shall not fall...Thou shalt show me the path of life: in Thy presence is the fulness of joy: and at Thy right hand there is pleasure for evermore!

LECTURE XII.

FOUR CHARACTERS.

ACTS v. 41, 42.

And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.

TIMES of trial are also not seldom times of triumph. What we ought to dread above all things, as Christians, is stagnation; a condition, within or without, of indolent quiescence and suspended animation. It would be far better that the worshippers in this Church should come together through the taunts and sneers of a scoffing populace, and go hence to stand oftentimes alone in their testimony for

the truth amidst friends and relatives; than that they frequented God's house because it was customary and fashionable to do so, and were marked by no difference and no singularity in their confession of Christ at home. The truth is, a fallen world can never be a resting world. If there is no struggle, there can be no victory: if there is no suffering for the Gospel, there will be no earnestness in its cause and no experience of its power.

Mark, in this aspect, the scene here presented for our contemplation. See what the Gospel was, while it was still fresh and young. See how it wrought; how it fermented, like leaven, in the society into which it was first thrown; how it made common men, who had but a few days before received it into their hearts, bold to speak and strong to suffer. O for something of the same faith and of the same zeal in these cold hearts and these sluggish lives of ours!

The Church, that is, the company and congregation of the faithful, had received a startling proof of the nearness of God to them, and of the perilous responsibility involved in being a Christian. It is indeed playing with edge-tools to be a worshipper or a believer by halves.

First to draw nigh to God in sacraments and services, and then to trifle with Him; first to profess to believe in a heart-searching God, and then to try experiments upon His penetration; this is a fearful risk indeed. This is what Ananias and Sapphira dared to do; and their awful history is told in Scripture for the admonition and warning of every later and latest age. That was a picture of the Church from its inner side; of the Christian body in its relation to Christ its Head. And now we are to view again its outer aspect; towards the world that looked on; and looked on with varied feelings, of respectful awe, of admiring gratitude, of bitter hostility, or of candid observation.

By means of the hands of the Apostles many signs and wonders took place among the people. A *wonder*, or *miracle*, is a simple surprise; something out of the course of nature, as we speak: a *sign* or *signal* is a wonder which points to something; a departure from the course of nature which intends to call attention to a hand or to a person out of sight. All the Christian miracles are signs also. *And they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch:* that was the mustering place, the head quarters, of

the community, in public. *And of the rest,* of those who did not yet believe, *no one presumed to attach himself to them.* A sort of sanctity hung visibly about them, which warned off idle intrusion. It was not, as now, that whoever was nothing else called himself a Christian; or that people could come and go to the Christian's assembly and to the Christian's worship unquestioned and unchallenged: there was a meaning then, a felt meaning, in the profession of faith; and the recent example of Divine severity, the exposure and the fate of two pretenders, two intruders into the camp of the saints, added doubtless, to that awe which, like the pillar of fire and cloud in the Exodus, separated between the army of Israel and the host of Egypt.

No one presumed to attach himself to them without believing: *but the people magnified them;* the common people paid them all reverence and honour: *and more* even than before *were believing persons* constantly *being added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.*

There was a general impression of the power, and of the beneficence of the new faith and its professors; *so that throughout the streets people carried out the sick and placed them*

upon couches and beds, that as Peter came, even his shadow might overshadow some one of them. Like the believing touch of our Lord's own garment, the very lying for a moment under Peter's shadow availed for restoration where there was the mind of faith. It needed not a touch, it needed not a word; it was enough if the very shadow rested upon the sick man as the great Apostle went by. It was not necessary, if God was pleased to work, that He should work in this mode rather than in that: the touch was but a sign, the word was but an indication, of the outcoming of the healing virtue: it was not necessary that either should be employed: the shadow, if He wills, may do as well. *There came together also* daily *the multitude* (*population*) *of the cities round Jerusalem, carrying sick persons and* any *troubled* (*molested*) *by unclean spirits, and they were healed all.*

Such an excitement could not but attract the renewed attention of the enemies of the Gospel. *The high priest rose up*, prepared himself for an act of vigour, *and all who were with him*, his assessors and advisers, *that which is the party of the Sadducees*—these deniers of spirit and of the resurrection were then in the ascendant—*and were filled with jealousy* at the

success of the new religion, *and laid their hands on the Apostles, and got them placed in public custody. But an angel of the Lord, through (in the course of) the night, opened the doors of the prison, and led them out, and said, Go, and taking your stand in the temple speak to the people all the words of this life;* of this heavenly, this eternal life, with the announcement of which you are charged. *And when they heard* this, *they entered at daybreak into the temple, and began to teach. And the high priest having arrived* at the usual place of meeting—in a hall (it is said) adjoining the great gate of the Temple—*and they that were with him, they called together the council, and all the elderhood of the sons of Israel*—the assembly known as the Sanhedrin, or religious council of the seventy elders—*and sent to the prison for them to be brought. And the officers that came* there *found them not in the prison; and they returned and reported, saying, The prison-house we found closed,* locked and barred, *in all security, and the guards standing at the door; but when we opened it we found no one within. And when they heard these words, both the* high *priest, and the captain of the temple*—the Jewish officer who commanded the Levitical guard—*and the chief*

priests, the heads and leaders of the priestly body, *they were at a loss concerning them what this thing might become*, to what result all this might come. *And some one arrived, and reported to them, Behold, the men whom ye caused to be placed in the prison, are standing in the temple, and teaching the people. Then the captain* of the temple *departed with the officers, and brought them, not with violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned; and they brought them, and set them in* (*before*) *the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, We strictly charged you not to teach on the ground of this name; and behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and wish to bring upon us the blood of this man. But Peter answered, and the Apostles, and said, We must obey God rather than men.* If he lays a charge upon us, we must fulfil it, come what may. *The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye dispatched by hanging Him on a tree: Him did God exalt as a Prince and a Saviour by* (*with*) *His own right hand*, by the exercise of His Almighty power, *to give repentance to Israel and dismissal of sins. And we are His witnesses of these words*, of the truth of these facts, *and the Holy Spirit also, whom God gave*

to those who obey Him. The descent of the Holy Ghost on the great day of Pentecost was God's own witness borne along with the human evidence of things actually seen and known.

And they when they heard were cut to the heart—literally, *were sawn asunder*, as it were, by the violence of their rage and fury—*and they took counsel to slay them. But there rose one in the council, a Pharisee, by name Gamaliel*—and we all recognize the name as that of the instructor in early days of St Paul himself—*a teacher of the law, honourable in the judgment of all the people, and urged them to put the men out for a short time,* that the discussion might be more freely carried on; *and,* when this was done, *said to them, Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves with regard to these men what ye are about to do.* This is, in one sense, not the first case of the kind, with which you have had to deal. Some time ago there was Theudas, a man of large professions, who collected a body of four hundred followers, and you saw what it all came to: he was put to death, and his party dispersed and annihilated. Then there was Judas of Galilee—the same thing again—first a brief success, and then utter ruin. Therefore I counsel calmer mea-

sures. *Refrain from these men: let them alone.* If their plans and their proceedings are of men only, depend upon it, the enterprise will come to a natural end: it will meet the fate of all human enterprises against law and order. But if it should so happen, that in this one instance we have a work of God to deal with, all your efforts to put it down will be in vain; and you must take good care lest, in opposing it, you should be found to be fighting against God. The weight of a great name, and (we may well suppose) the manifest wisdom of the counsel itself, prevailed over prejudice and exasperation. *They obeyed him, and calling the Apostles in they beat them*—though uncondemned, though virtually acquitted by their judges, they must still (like their Master before them) be put to this pain and ignominy—*and* then *charged them not to speak on the ground of the name of Jesus, and released them. They then went their way rejoicing from the presence of the council, because they were deemed worthy to be disgraced in behalf of the Name,* the great and sacred Name of their beloved Lord: *and throughout every day, in the temple, and at home, they ceased not to teach and to proclaim the glad tidings of the Christ* as being *Jesus;* as

having come in the person of Jesus; to declare one to another, and in the hearing of Israel, that the Messiah, promised of old, was come, and come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, first crucified, now risen. *We have found Him, of whom Moses in the Law, and the Prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*

The use which I would make of the passage thus summarily glanced at, is as an exhibition of various characters by which we may test and judge our own.

1. And first, there is the character of the chief priests and elders; faithful still to their conduct towards Christ Himself; persecuting the servant as they before had persecuted the Lord. One new feature there is in this persecution. It is, more distinctly than in the Gospels, a Sadducean hostility. Among the impugners of our Lord's own doctrine the Pharisee is unquestionably the more conspicuous: the severest words of all uttered by the Saviour are directed against the Pharisee; it is he who is ever at hand *to catch something out of His mouth;* it is he whose hypocrisy of heart made him dread Christ's discernment and Christ's holiness, and whose very orthodoxy on some vital points of doctrine gave a self-

sufficiency to his judgment peculiarly unfavourable to the real reception of the truth. But no sooner has Christ left the earth than the opposite party rises into more prominence as assailants of His Gospel. And most natural it was that a Gospel built upon a resurrection should irritate most strongly the sect which denied that great hope of man. While it was a mere tenet of doctrine, they bore it with composure: when it became a statement of fact, it was at once a struggle for life and death. Thus there were occasions, of which this book in its later chapters will tell, when the Pharisee, confessing the resurrection, lends his aid to the faith which is suffering in that behalf. And great as were the faults of the Pharisee, severe as his condemnation was from the lips of Him who is truth, he had yet in some respects a shorter path to traverse if once his steps should be turned in the direction of Christ's kingdom. The Sadducee was a cold, scoffing, irreligious materialist. It would be an affront to any sect within the Christian Church to compare it with such a model. Nevertheless if there be a body of professed Christians who seek to divest the Gospel of all its supernatural character; who cut out of it every element of

Divinity, whether in the form of miracle or of inspiration; who resolve its whole system of duty into respectability rather than holiness of conduct, and good nature rather than charity towards other men; who practically make their nest here, and leave out of sight, while they may, the revelation of a world to come; then that body is the type, imperfect but real, of the Sadducee of other days: and those who have seen anything, in detail, of the working of that spirit in men who call themselves Christians, will be at no loss to understand how the Sadducee should outrun even the Pharisee in the bitterness of his hostility to all that is distinctive and characteristic in the Gospel.

Nor need we look to other sects or other Churches for examples of enmity to the cross of Christ. The spirit of the Sadducee is in all of us by nature, struggling in us for the mastery with that of the Pharisee and the Herodian. Each one of these is but the development of one attribute of fallen nature. What is the Sadducee but the man who avows his disbelief in mysteries of which we all have too feeble a grasp? I might ask, which of us has a firm hold of those particular revelations, the denial of which would make a Sadducee of him by

profession? Which of us really and truly expects the resurrection, or can say with any consistency in the words of our Creed, *I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come?* And if the best of us rather gropes amidst these things in the dark, than walks among them as in the light of perfect day, what shall we say of those who have accustomed themselves to treat everything lightly till nothing is serious, nothing is grave to them; who have a jest ready for every revelation, and a scoff for every demand of duty, till at length they can neither tremble at God's terrors nor believe in God's love? O the bitterness of the scoffer, towards one who possesses a hope which he has flung away! O the acrimony with which he exposes a weakness, and watches for a fall, in one of Christ's servants! These things are not of the past: they are of the present. The Sadducees of our day do not gather themselves together in council and conclave, to try and to judge the disciples of the Lord: they themselves use the same name, and would be indignant at the denial of the title. But they hate, none the less, and they disparage, and they persecute too, those who truly believe; point at them as ignorant, as old-fashioned,

as righteous overmuch, as slaves of the letter, as exclusive and positive and self-sufficient; and many a life is embittered still many a heart is disquieted and dejected, many a man feels himself an alien and an outcast from the society which he loves and the sympathies for which he yearns, because he will take Christ at His word, and will live and die in the faith as it was once delivered to the saints. The persecutors of the Christian are amongst us still, and oftentimes they are persecutors in conduct because they are first Sadducees in spirit. May such persons, if any such there be amongst us, ask themselves seriously this one question, Am I certain that I shall never want Christ myself; want Him in loneliness and sorrow, want Him in age and sickness, want Him in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment? If I know not this, and know it not for certain, let me take heed how I now make it impossible that I should ever seek Him then!

2. And when we turn from this extreme of hostility to the cause of Christ, through the various stages which separate it from an entire devotion, are we not struck with the existence in these days of many a Gamaliel; of many a

man who is at once observant and candid, anxious to do nothing rashly, waiting, rather, to examine credentials, or even to see the end, before he pronounces himself decisively either for or against the Gospel? These men have much in them that is attractive, and at first sight all that is reasonable. What can we desire more, we are ready to ask, than that a person be open-minded and calmly judging; an adviser of caution, a hater of precipitation, in decisions for eternity; a man reminding the powerful of the rights of the humble, and the prejudiced of the supremacy of truth? What but good can come, we might enquire, of that prudent and sensible reminder, in a time of religious excitement and enthusiasm, *If this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it, and see lest haply ye be found even to fight against God?* O for a voice, we say, so calm and so judicial, to mediate and to moderate in the dissensions of party zeal! And no doubt such a voice is useful; useful in the counsels of rulers, useful on the bench of justice. Happy the nation which has such men amongst its counsellors, when an act of hasty tyranny is in danger of treading out the spark of grace

and truth! Such a man is far removed from the enemies of Christ, if he be not yet enrolled amongst His friends. This was the part of Nicodemus, when the case of One greater than the Apostles was at issue, and he reminded his impetuous colleagues of that first maxim of equity, *Doth our law judge any man before it hear him, and know what he doeth?* Not long afterwards, he who at first came to Jesus by night, and who even at this stage in his history is a timid and doubting ally, is found tending the lifeless corpse from which Apostles have fled panic-stricken, and testifying a love and a devotion refused by men who owe to Christ their all.

But yet we must not overrate a quality which has so much in it of good. Candour, moderation, an open mind and a calm judgment, these are useful qualities; these, at certain times, may rise even into great virtues. But we dare not say that any one of them, or that all of them together, will suffice to save a soul. There are just a few great questions on which minds ought to be made up; on which if the evidence we possess be not sufficient for conviction, it is our first and most bounden duty to seek and to obtain more. Such a

question, above all others, is that of the truth and power, of the person and work, of the Messiahship and Divinity, of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To be candid on this subject is better indeed than to be prejudiced, scoffing, or hostile: but there is a third alternative besides these two; and he who is merely candid concerning Christ is in danger of a life-long suspense, of an ultimate indifference. Men of mere candour, admirable and beautiful as that gift is, are commonly men who in great emergencies disappoint, and in critical decisions are even worse than foes. Their presence is fatal to generous impulses, to noble enthusiasms. Erasmus was the Gamaliel of the Reformation; calm, critical, deliberative, discerning: but where would the Reformation have been, if beside Erasmus there had not been a Luther? If all had waited to see whether this counsel or this work was of men or of God, by watching for its issue, the blow for truth had never been struck, and a reformed faith had never emerged from the mists of Papal darkness. In details, or on subjects of minor moment, it is harmless, it is right, to be Gamaliels: but on the one great question, of having or not having a Saviour, of being or not being re-

deemed and pardoned and justified, that man is a fool who postpones his decision, a lost man who dies without making it.

3. I would have distinguished, did time permit, a third character among those here presented; that of the common people who *magnified* the believers though they durst not join them, and who gladly used, though it were but from a distance, their beneficent and healing power. These too have their counterpart amongst us. There are men, and there are women, now in the midst of us, who reverence religion with all their hearts; who count the Christian alone happy; who delight, as it were, to gather the crumbs beneath the sacred table, to profit by Christian converse and to record the triumphs of the Gospel; but who yet shrink from counting themselves very members of that holy fellowship; never think themselves worthy even of an approach to the sacramental feast; and if they should die in this state, would die with faintest hope of attaining to the inheritance of the saints in light. Such persons are not against Christ, yet neither are they yet quite with Him. They are something more than candid enquirers; something far, far beyond men waiting, like

Gamaliel, to see the end, and judge from a point wholly out of sight, a point unattainable on earth, of the testimonials and credentials of the Gospel. Would that they could be induced to take just that one step which divides them from every hope and every comfort of a Christian! Would that they could be led, by God's grace, to cross boldly that narrow margin, and become not spectators only but inmates of the sacred porch of Solomon! Believe only, not that Christ died for some, but that He died for thee; believe only, not in the abstract doctrine of forgiveness, but in the fact of the forgiveness of thy sins: and thou art one with the Christian fellowship; no longer an admirer but a partaker of the promises, yea, a fellow-citizen with the saints, and of the very household of God!

4. Finally, the text itself, and the passage now reviewed, tells us of a fourth character; that of the not *almost* but *altogether* Christian. Hear his creed as it is rehearsed in this record. *I believe that I ought to obey God rather than men. I believe that Christ died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification. I believe that God has exalted Him to be a Prince and a Saviour. I believe that the very purpose*

of that exaltation is, that He may bestow repentance and bestow forgiveness. I believe that God for His sake gives His Holy Spirit to all who set themselves in His strength to obey. What is this but the faith of our own Church, handed down to us from days when Peter and Paul, when John and James, yet trod the earth? This is the faith of which it was written, *If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.* This was the faith which enabled Apostles to brave persecution, nay, to rejoice to be *counted worthy to suffer shame,* or even death itself, *for the name,* the one sufficient name in which alone is salvation. My brethren, who can doubt which of these four characters is the one which it would be happiest to live with, safest and most glorious to possess in death? Believe only, and it shall be yours! It is not far off from thee, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up to heaven for me, that he may fetch it and give it? or, Who shall go over the sea for me, and bring it to me, that I may take it and wear it? Nay, it is very nigh thee; offered thee freely, made thine by prayer: whosoever will may have it for the asking. God of His

infinite mercy endue us all with it; that earnest faith, that bright hope, that generous love, that noble courage! Then, come life or come death, it must be well with us: for *we are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

LECTURE XIII.

THE FIRST ORDINATION.

ACTS VI. 15.

And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

IN the early Church all was movement. In these few pages, while the annals of the Church are still journals, what have we not read of? Signs and wonders, first from above, and then (yet more decisively) within; numerous, sudden, but most real conversions; persecutions bravely endured; public testimony nobly borne; hypocrisy and deception instantly unmasked and detected by a gift of discernment as infallible as it was intuitive; these were the marks of a Church that had life in it, of a Church in which God Himself was still dwelling and

working. It ought to be a solemn and heart-searching process, with all of us, to read of these things in our days and in our congregations. God grant that it be not all in vain!

Now see the Church adapting itself to new wants, and facing new difficulties.

And in those days, while the disciples were multiplying, there arose a murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews, that their widows were being overlooked in the daily ministration. The Hellenists were those Jews who spoke the Greek language, and whose ordinary abode was out of Palestine. They were commonly looked down upon by the Hebrews, who prided themselves upon having adhered to the national language, and (for the most part, though not exclusively) to the national home. This jealousy found its way even into the Christian body. Out of that common fund, of which we have read in former chapters, there was a daily distribution, in the form of food or money, according to the wants of each person or each household. A suspicion arose that this distribution was not fairly made. You all know how common such misunderstandings and such imputations are in all charitable ministrations. Human nature is the same in all times; and here we

read of its first outbreak in a blessed and holy society. The Hellenists considered that *their widows*, the desolate and destitute members of their section of the Church, were overlooked in the daily distribution. And see how wisely and how considerately the complaint was met.

And the twelve, the Apostles, who till now appear to have been the sole rulers and the sole managers of the affairs of the community, *called to them the multitude of the disciples, and said, It is not satisfactory that we should desert the word of God and serve* (*minister to*) *tables.* The labour of providing for the support of the poor was now becoming so onerous, in the increased numbers of the community, as grievously to interfere with the spiritual functions of those who were charged with the ministry of the Word. And this, they say, is *not pleasing;* not consistent with the will of God, or of those whose heart is set upon higher duties. *Look ye out then, brethren, seven attested men from among you,* seven men of good report or character, *full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business: and we will adhere to prayer and the ministry of the word.* The ministry or service of the word is set in contrast with the ministry or service of

tables: it is the same expression in the two cases.

And the word, the proposal, *pleased*, was satisfactory, *in the sight of all the multitude: and they selected Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus a proselyte of Antioch.* Judging by the names alone, we should suppose them to have been all Grecians or Hellenists; leaving the Hebrew section to be cared for as before. *Whom they set before the Apostles; and they* (the Apostles) *prayed and* then *laid on them their hands.* The choice was made by the whole Church: but the solemn act of consecration was performed by the Apostles.

Thus was a complaint remedied, and an impediment to effective action removed.

And the word of God grew on, and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem, and a great company of the priests obeyed the faith. A marvellous testimony to the truth and power of the Gospel! The very priests, whose interests and prepossessions were all strongly against it, now began, in large numbers, to add themselves to the Church of Christ.

And now our attention is to be fixed for

some time upon one person; one eminent member of the new order.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, a man largely endowed with that grace, that favour and blessing, of God, which is the strength of man, *was doing great wonders and signs among the people. But there arose some of those who belonged to the synagogue which was called that of the Libertini and of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, disputing with Stephen.* The Libertini were the class of Roman freedmen, or enfranchised slaves. A Roman historian tells of the addiction of this class to Jewish superstitions, and of their banishment, in consequence, from Rome, fourteen or fifteen years before this time, by a decree of the Senate under the Emperor Tiberius. Four thousand of them were sent to the island of Sardinia, and the rest were to leave Italy unless before a certain day they renounced their religious rites. This fact sufficiently accounts for their having now a synagogue in Jerusalem. Cyrene and Alexandria, cities of Africa, were great centres of Jewish residence. Thus *Egypt, and the parts of Libya about Cyrene,* are especially mentioned as furnishing Jewish visitors to Jerusalem on the

great day of Pentecost. Cilicia, of which the chief town was Tarsus, and Asia (in its more limited sense, of a district on the Western side of Asia Minor) also gave names, as we are here told, to two at least of the 460 or 480 synagogues of which we read as existing at this time in Jerusalem. These were the leaders of the opposition to the holy and devoted work of him who was destined to be the first martyr for the cause of Christ.

And they had not strength to withstand the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. I will give you, such had been our Lord's promise to His people, *a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.*

That which could not be done fairly must be done by artifice. Like his Master before him, Stephen must fall under false evidence. And in both cases the false evidence is of that particular kind—the most difficult of all to answer—which consists in the distortion of truth: the literal words given, but the context and scope of the words wholly misrepresented and belied. *Then they suborned men saying,* they prepared or procured men privily to give this evidence, *We have heard him speak blas-*

phemous (*calumnious*) *words as to Moses and God. And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and set upon him, and seized him, and brought him to the council,* the Sanhedrin, or council of the Seventy, of which we have read in earlier chapters, *and set false witnesses saying, This man ceases not to speak words against the holy place and the law: for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth,* this Jesus, of whom we have lately heard so much—there is a mixture of impatience and contempt in the form of the expression—*shall destroy this place, and change the customs which Moses delivered to us,* gave us by transmission (such is the force of the expression) from the mouth of God. *And all who took their seats in the council, when they had fixed their gaze upon him, saw his countenance as if the countenance of an angel.*

And let us too, my brethren, fix our gaze upon the scene here presented. We shall find in this opening passage of the record of the first Christian martyrdom, much to instruct us in the wisdom of God, and to guide us in the way in which we should go.

1. And first we will say a word upon the manner in which Christ, the great Head of the

Church, has fulfilled His original promise, *Lo, I am with you alway.* It has not been by fixing one rigid immovable framework of law and discipline, with which, amidst all conceivable varieties and variations of circumstances, human affairs must be forced into consistency. We read to-night of what is commonly called the institution of the diaconate, of the order of deacons in the Church of Christ. The word *deacon* does not, I believe, occur with reference to these first seven officers. The only one of them whose name occurs in the subsequent history is described as *Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven.* And we have already noticed, by implication at least, that the word from which the terms *deacon, deaconship, diaconate*, are derived is just as much used here of the work of the Apostles as of the seven delegates: the *ministry* (or *deaconship*) *of the word* is set in contrast with the *ministry* (or *deaconship*) *of tables.* What do I draw from this? Two remarks.

(1) We must be careful not to be slaves of words. We must not be quite sure that, because we have the name *deacons* in our Church system, therefore we have the exact thing so designated in Scripture; or (to take another

example) that, because we read of *bishops* in the New Testament, therefore the Church officers whom we so describe hold precisely the same place, or exercise precisely the same functions.

(2) How beautifully does God adapt His measures, in the government of His Church, to the circumstances in which, as the God of Providence, He from time to time sets that Church! thereby giving us an added reason for believing that the God of Providence is also the Lord and God of the Church. Trace the observation through the narrative here before us. In the first days of all, there were no Church officers at all save the Apostles. They were the teachers, they were the rulers, they were also the bankers and the treasurers, the almoners and the distributors, of the Christian community. By degrees their work becomes overwhelming. Secular business—for such in fact it was—has encroached upon, and is in danger of absolutely engrossing, time and strength needed for higher purposes. The rapid growth of numbers, and the self-denying sacrifices of property for Church uses, occasioned by the devoted zeal of first convictions, have together created a whole department of duty which cannot be neglected

without injury of one kind, nor attended to without injury of another. Complaints are arising that the interests of one section of the disciples are being postponed to those of another section. Under these circumstances how does the indwelling Spirit of wisdom guide and counsel? In other words, how does the ever-living Lord of the Church direct and guard its course? A new emergency demands a new expedient. Let the functions of administration be divided. Men of equity and good sense are enough for the discharge of one; the apportionment of the funds of charity. This work requires not the higher gifts of inspiration, and would rather hinder their exercise. Sometimes inferior endowments do even better for this lower and humbler duty. Let then the Church itself—that is, the whole body of believing people—select a few persons—say, seven in number—to relieve the Apostles of the daily distribution. This is good counsel: the Church will be the better for it. And then the Apostles can return with less distraction to their great spiritual duties; prayer, and the ministry of the Word. The inference we draw from this narrative is, not the necessity of having always seven men in every congregation charged with

the work of deacons; still less, the necessity of having in every truly Apostolical Church an order of men so denominated, without reference to the particular duties which they may be set to fulfil; but rather, the importance of looking changes of Church circumstances full in the face, and meeting them with faith and firmness, with an earnest purpose and an unshaken courage.

We say indeed, in the Preface to our Ordination Services, that *it is evident to all men diligently reading the holy Scripture and ancient authors, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church; Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.* There have been in all times three departments of duty, needing for their right discharge three orders of Church Officers. There has been the work of ruling; of ordering with authority details of practice in the congregations, and of exercising discipline over such as do amiss. And there has been the work of the regular Pastor; the work of leading the worship, of conducting the instruction, and of superintending the daily life, of the congregation; of visiting the sick, teaching the young, and seeking to reclaim for Christ the wandering and the

outcast. And there has been in the third place the work of seeking out the poor and needy, of providing for their relief, of gathering the alms of the congregation, and of assisting in its services by all such means as do not imply either authority to govern or authority to teach. We believe that our own Church has adhered to the Apostolical model in so distributing its ministerial duties. We believe that a Church which seeks to combine all these offices in one, is wanting, at least in this respect, as much in wisdom as in humility. But it is not the possession of the name which secures to us the thing. Theory is seldom identical with practice: it may depart from it very widely. And we must not hesitate to confess that in practice our Church has too much lost, under the pressure of circumstances, one at least of her three Orders. The rapid and unequal growth of our national population, the obsolete yet unchangeable distribution of our Parishes, and the poverty (I do not fear to say it) of our ordinary Church endowments, have compelled us, in most cases, to use our Deacons almost as Priests: in other words, it has been better to allow the higher office to be encroached upon by the lower, than to leave our Churches without

pastors, or to acquiesce in the assumption of the pastoral office by unordained men.

We speak of this necessity as an evil: doubtless it has caused a departure in practice from the rigid theory of our Church constitution. But do we say that even these circumstances are not of the Lord? Do we say that this unavoidable modification of our Church system, arising out of causes beyond our control, has been a thing to mourn over as a sin? Nay, my brethren, we read with more intelligence—or think we do—the opening words of this Chapter, *And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied.* We see in those words the encouragement of the Church of all time, to hope that her exigencies have a notice in heaven, and her efforts to meet them an approval from One who is with her alway. What has been the issue—what, we may humbly say, the design—of our present difficulties? We have been compelled to use for higher work men invested only with the name of deacons: and both they, and we of the middle order, are in danger of being constrained too much to leave the Word of God and serve tables: we find ourselves week by week, in our large towns, too much called off from sacred

employments to manage charitable funds, to superintend the daily distribution, even to assist in the formation and superintendence of institutions merely benevolent: these things are all against us; we are tempted to complain of them as simply adverse, entirely calamitous. But what should *the answer of God* say to us? Shall it not remind us that in every emergency His Spirit can suggest a remedy for that which His Providence has permitted? Shall it not bid us take counsel with ourselves and with one another as to the remedies, as to the correctives, at least as to the palliatives, which we may apply to the diseases of our times? And may it not remind us of the blessings which have resulted, and which may still more largely result, from the necessity which has been upon us of looking more to the congregation, to brethren and sisters moving in common life, set apart by no act of ordination, but *giving themselves first to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God,* to aid us in those parts of our pressing duty which it can be no profanation for a layman to discharge; more especially in that *serving of tables*, that care for the bodily wants of the poor, which in the first days caused the establishment of a new order in the ministry,

and which in all times must be one of the first anxieties and first responsibilities of a Church which, like its Lord, would *go about* upon earth *doing good?* It may not be by the help of new statutes or new canons; it may not be by the enactment of rulers whether in Church or State; but, God helping us, it shall be by the spontaneous and not less Christian growth, in our several Parishes, of a spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice, that we will meet the wants of our times, looking out among us men and women of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom, whom we, with the strictest regard to propriety and Church order, will set over this part of the business to which we are unequal, if so be, for your sakes and for our own, we may with the less distraction give ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. While others are looking this way and that, to Convocation or to Parliament, for new names and new rules by which the wants of the world may be met and the disorders of a Church system redressed; let us rather see what we, each of us, can do for the place in which our lot is cast, and by the help of Church-Wardens, of Scripture Readers, of District Visitors, and of voluntary School teachers, do rather than dis-

cuss the work which Christ in every age looks for from His Church and from His people. *It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables:* help us then, every one of you, to whom God has given the will and the power, in carrying out more successfully the noble determination, *We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.*

2. Do not say, beloved brethren, that the topic thus brought before you is wanting in practical edification. It is not so, if God give the grace to entertain and to apply it. But we will not separate without an earnest effort to learn something, as from the institution which introduces to us the history of Stephen, so also from the account of his life and the record of his spirit.

He was a man *full of grace and power.* Yes, grace is power. He who has the favour of God with him, and the blessing of God upon him, cannot be weak, must be strong. Men much mistake the way to power. They think place will give it: or they think fame will give it: or they think a vehement manner, a noisy, pushing, obtrusive forwardness, which will let nothing be done without their help and pre-

sence, will give them power. O, much do they mistake in these ideas of it! Commune much with your own heart; be still in the solitude of your chamber; lie low before God's footstool in penitence and prayer: and then come forth to your work and to your labour; fill your assigned place, high or low, as God's consecrated one, in all lowliness and in all meekness; and you will be a man of power too! Men will *take knowledge of you that you have been with Jesus;* and in that connection, that companionship, with Him, is everlasting strength.

Who that has lived even to middle age has not been struck with the position which true grace holds in the life of this world? At first sight we have thought a good man feeble: we have seen him using a courtesy and a humility and a self-forgetfulness and a preference of others, which we have hastily associated with the idea of weakness. But we have looked again, years afterwards, and that man has accomplished works not given to the strong. It is he who has effected great things for God: it is he who has regenerated a Parish, it is he who has overcome opposition and lived down obloquy, it is he whom enemies respect and strong men follow. Not in vain are the words

written, *Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. The meek-spirited shall possess the earth, and shall be refreshed in the multitude of peace.* They who by faith *see the Invisible* are men not more of faith than of power. And one day they shall be owned as such, *when he that overcometh shall inherit all things.*

The text seems to tell us of a power in the very *look* of faith. Stephen stood before the council, charged with blasphemy against God and God's law, charged with profaneness towards the temple, and impiety towards Him who dwelt there. Around and before him were his judges; full of prejudice and animosity, prepared to condemn, and, if to condemn, to execute. And yet, as they gazed on that face, they could not but own that it shone as with angelic lustre: the heavenly calm, the profound peace, the entire trust, the perfect patience, written on that brow so that he who ran might read, betokened the presence of one who had beheld the very face of God, of one of those messengers who *excel in strength,* who *fulfil God's commandment, hearkening to the voice of His words.* Before he spoke, he was heard. God was in his countenance before He was on

his lips. O the power of that wondrous instrument, the human face, for good or else for evil! O the persuasiveness of that eloquence of the good man's countenance, which needs not breath to make it vocal! O the transparency of that eye which knows not deceit; the repose of that brow which communes much with heaven! Before it, again and again, vice has slunk away ashamed, and the word of impurity and profaneness died upon the lips unspoken. Yes, the tale of a life is recorded on our faces; insensibly we reveal it. *The skin of Moses's face shone* after communion with God: he veiled it in condescension to the sinful. It is a true parable. Let a man be much with God, and his very face will show it. God grant that more of us may bear this most undesigned, most unsuspicious testimony, to the certainty of things hoped for, the reality of things not seen!

LECTURE XIV.

LIVING ORACLES.

Acts vii. 38.

Who received the lively oracles to give unto us.

There are those who confess themselves unable to discern in St Stephen's defence before the Jewish Council anything directly bearing upon the accusation which it sought to refute. They only read it as a rehearsal of his creed as a believer in the Jewish Scriptures. They suppose him to have desired to ingratiate himself with his audience, by reciting to them the history of God's dealings with their nation, and showing himself a true-hearted Israelite, incapable of doing despite to the Law or to the Temple. And no doubt it is the speech of a simple and perhaps unlettered man, not the composition of a master of rhetoric or an

experienced debater. No doubt also its opening paragraphs are so expressed as to avoid prematurely irritating his judges by an avowal of the personal application which lies beneath all and at length bursts from his lips. We may suppose also, if we will, that the address was rudely interrupted before it had reached that orderly close which might have given clearness and consistency to the whole.

But, with all these abatements, which of us may not admire in this defence a real and true fulfilment of the Saviour's promise, *I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist?*

For what, let us remember, was the crime imputed to him? What was the indictment, as we read it in the last chapter? *Then they suborned men, who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God. They brought him to the council, and set up false witnesses, who said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law: for we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.* Irreverence towards

the Law of Moses and the Temple, shown in predicting that the time was at hand when the Lord and Saviour would bring both to an end, this was the offence of the prisoner as defined by the accusers and substantiated by their witnesses.

How could any line of defence be more suitable than one which, while recognizing to the full the divine mission of Moses, the divine origin of the Law, and the divine institution of the Temple, should yet show that these things were all supplementary in their introduction and parenthetical in their design? That the promises of God, as made to the forefathers of Israel, were entirely independent, both in place and time, of those institutions which were now regarded as their sole depository and shrine? That the call of Abraham was made far away from Canaan, and that whole centuries even of the later national history were passed in other lands? That the great Lawgiver himself was not only refused and disobeyed by his people, but himself prophesied of the coming of a greater and mightier than himself? That this Temple on which they prided themselves, on which they threw the whole stress of their faith and dependence, had not

only been late in its erection, but was also spoken of by their own prophets as never (in the highest sense of all) the dwelling-place of God? And that, finally, no amount of confidence on their part in the clearness of their discernment or the justice of their judgment, on a question of religion or of revelation, could be the slightest indication, in reality, of truth or right; every prophet, in his generation, having been set at nought and persecuted, not excluding even the Messiah Himself, of whom, while professing daily to look for Him, they had themselves been now the betrayers and murderers? I know not that any line of argument, any amount of premeditation or any art of eloquence, could have touched more exactly the very point at issue, or entered more thoroughly into the hidden principles which gave interest and importance to the decision.

It is not my intention to break up this discourse into portions, and to go minutely into the details of the history which it recapitulates. But let me run through the topics as they occur, and briefly indicate their connection with the accusation and defence. In so doing, I shall seek to express by a brief paraphrase

what I understand to be the purport and sequence of the whole discourse.

You charge me with disparaging the local character of our religion. You say that I speak of this Temple as destined to an overthrow predicted by my Master. Let me remind you then how far, and how far only, the faith of our fathers is bound up with local conditions. The original home and cradle of our race was not Palestine, but Mesopotamia, in the far East, on the other side of the great river, the river Euphrates. It was there that the voice of God was first heard calling to fallen man. The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he even dwelt in Haran; before even that first migration which landed him not in Canaan but in a temporary restingplace. Hence in due season He removed him, by the same Divine call, into this land in which ye now dwell. But how did he enter it? As an owner? as a conqueror? as a sovereign? Nay, he possessed not in it land enough to set his foot on. And yet the promises were all his even then; and the Divine favour and protection; and the Divine communion and friendship. Judge ye therefore how far God's blessing is local! Judge ye, even in

this first and greatest example, how far God is a respecter either of place or form!

And that independence of place which was first exemplified in Abraham, was indicated no less in the prediction of his children's fortunes. In a strange land should they sojourn for centuries, and yet be God's people and God's chosen still. See how that prophecy was fulfilled; by what sins, through what sufferings, of man; by what providences and what interpositions on the part of God. Behold the young brother sold as a slave by foes of his own household: see him carried into a remote and unfriendly land; him, the best and noblest of the sons of Israel: see him cast out of his father's home as one despised and forsaken, and yet, through vicissitudes as strange as they were sudden, raised to the pinnacle of greatness, while his father's sons bowed down to him. Does the thought occur to you, that in the varying fortunes of Joseph may have been prefigured the suffering and glory of a later and a mightier One? May not your own hands be red with the blood of a Brother after the flesh, who is also after the spirit your Lord and your Judge?

Trace then yet onward the course of the national history, and see the whole family of

Israel seeking refuge out of Canaan: see generation after generation toiling on in Egyptian bondage; excluded from the land of promise, yet losing thereby no one mark of their ancestral privilege; still recognized, in heaven if not upon earth, as God's people, beloved for the fathers' sake. And yet, all this time, nothing was theirs in Canaan but a buryingplace, and century after century was wheeling its slow course over their exile. Mark then how the national fortunes were sunk to their lowest level; the very permission to live sought in vain for their sons from their oppressors; when at last he arose, guarded by God's special Providence from a threatened similar fate, who was to be first the deliverer from bondage, and then (under God) the founder of a new Dispensation.

And observe, when he came, late in time and mature in age; came with thoughts and words of kindness, seeking to reconcile or to avenge his brethren; how he was received and dealt with. Who made thee (it was said to him) a ruler and a judge over us? If he whom you so much reverence was once thus despised and rejected of his countrymen, may it not perhaps have been so with One whom God sent to supersede him? Can you urge as an argument against the mission of

Jesus that general reproach and rejection, which would have been equally fatal to the authority of Moses? For forty years he was in exile; a double exile; not from Canaan only, but from Egypt also. At last his call came; came, once more, not in the land of promise but in the wilderness; came too on the ground not of a new but of an old relationship; not as to the founder of a new religion, but as to the inheritor of a patriarchal covenant. Forget not Abraham in Moses! Never allow yourselves to date from Sinai a possession which was yours from Mesopotamia and from Haran! In your zeal for a Levitical law, lose not sight of a patriarchal promise! The God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush of Horeb, was already the God of his fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob!

This Moses whom your ancestors refused, the same did God send to be their ruler and their deliverer. He brought them out. And do I disparage his high mission, by declaring that he was neither the first nor yet the last of God's messengers; that his Dispensation came in but by the way, between the Patriarchal and the Messianic? Listen to his own words. A Prophet (he said) shall the Lord your God raise

up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; Him shall ye hear. He himself pointed the eye of faith onward to One who should come; like himself, as to the human nature; yet greater than himself, in proportion as the forerunner is less than the foreannounced, the servant of one nation than the Lord of all. I then am but echoing the voice of Moses, when I declare that the customs which he delivered were not designed to be indestructible or final.

This is that Moses: and how did you receive him? He was with the church in the wilderness: with him was the Angel of the Divine Presence: to him were delivered those living oracles by which God communicated with His people: how did you treat him? Again and again you thrust him from you, and in your hearts turned back again into Egypt: little did you think then of that pleasant land which you would now make the whole of your inheritance and of your hope: yea, in the very wilderness you committed idolatry, and drew down upon you, before you entered Canaan, the threat of a second exile, of a national dispersion.

You charge me with blasphemy against the Temple. What have I said of it? I have said, it may be, that the Temple was no more God's

first or God's last dwellingplace below, than the Dispensation of Moses was either God's earliest or God's latest revelation. I have said that before the Temple was a Tabernacle; a Tabernacle fashioned under Divine direction; and exhibiting in solemn type realities which have their place in heaven. That was the centre of the Divine presence with Israel at the time when Joshua conquered, and through all the generations from Joshua to David. Does that consist with the idolatry of this Temple, as though without it God's presence would be impossible? Nay, have not your own Prophets declared that no temple made with hands can contain or enclose God? that heaven is His throne and earth is His footstool, and the very house which you build for Him already His handywork?

But with what hope can I urge upon you suggestions of reason or arguments of revelation? There is in you a tradition of resistance to the divine and the spiritual. Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. As they did to the servants, so have ye done to the Master: they slew the heralds of the Just One, and ye have been now His betrayers and murderers. O blessed and privileged—knew ye but your happiness—above all

nations! possessors of a Law, in the promulgation of which on Mount Sinai the very principalities and powers in heavenly places exercised a solemn and terrific office! and yet not keeping it; trifling ever with God's day of visitation, until at last your house is left unto you desolate!

Thus far I have sought to trace for you the order of St Stephen's defence; supplying here and there a link of thought perhaps intentionally left obscure, and passing lightly over many details, both of history and of argument, which seemed less than essential to its understanding as a whole. I trust there may be those amongst us whose reverence for God's Word may be heightened or quickened by our present study of one of its parts.

And now, before we pass to our conclusion, I will address one earnest word to persons who may have noticed with anxiety in this chapter, or who may have heard it noticed by others in a tone of cavil or disbelief, that in one or two minor points the account here given of the Jewish history seems to vary from that contained in the narrative of the Old Testament. For example, the history in the book of Genesis tells us that the buryingplace

bought by Abraham was in Mamre or Hebron, not at Sychem; and that it was bought by him of Ephron the Hittite, Jacob (not Abraham) being the purchaser of the ground at Shechem of the sons of Hamor Shechem's father. My friends, can you really suppose that a difference of this nature has anything to do, this way or that, with the substantial truth of the Gospel Revelation? I declare to you that I would not waste the time in endeavouring (if I were able) to reconcile such a variance. It is to be regretted that Christian persons, in their zeal for the literal accuracy of our Holy Book, have spoken and written as if they thought that anything could possibly depend upon such a question. We all know how easy it is to get two witnesses in a court of justice to give their stories of an occurrence in the same words: we all know also how instant is the suspicion of falsehood which that formal coincidence of statement brings upon them. Holy Scripture shows what I may indeed call a noble superiority to all such uniformity. Each book of our Bible is an independent witness; shown to be so, not least, by verbal or even actual differences on some trifling points of detail. And they who drink

most deeply at the fountainhead of Divine Truth, learn to estimate these things in the same manner; to feel what we might describe as a lordly disdain for all infidel objections drawn from this sort of petty, paltry, cavilling, carping, creeping criticism. Let our faith at last, God helping us, be strong enough and decided enough to override a few, or a multitude, of such objections! We will hear them unmoved: we will fearlessly examine them: if we cannot resolve them, then, in the power of a more majestic principle, we will calmly turn from them and pass them by. What we know not now, we may know hereafter; and if we *never* know, we will believe still!

For indeed the *lively oracles* of which the text speaks to us were given for other purposes than that of a merely intellectual satisfaction. What St Stephen says of the Law or of the books of Moses, what St Paul says of the Old Testament Scriptures in general, we shall all be prepared to claim as the description of our two Testaments, and of that Holy Bible which contains them both. That Book, as a whole, is our oracle: in it are comprised the living oracles, the oracles of God.

An oracle is the answer of a God. In days

of old, days of heathen superstition, men went with their difficulties to obtain an answer at some recognized utterance-place of their God. If a man was going to undertake an enterprise of any kind, if a king was about to make war upon another king, if a private person was at a loss upon any subject of domestic concern, he went, as it was said, to consult an oracle; to ask for an inspired direction whether he should go or not go, whether he should act or whether he should forbear. These days are past. It was a natural wish—one which we have all felt a thousand times—to have some finger-post erected for us at one of the ambiguous turning-points of life, saying, This is the way, not that: this is the path of safety; this is the way of duty: take this road, and thou shalt be safe; take not this, and thou shalt do well. In days of oracular responses, the answer was so framed, by the craft and fraud of priests, that, whichever way the event shaped itself, the answer could scarcely be found wanting: all was ambiguity, all was double-tongued: the credit of the oracle, not the welfare of the consultor, was the thing aimed at and guarded. Now *the oracles are dumb:* men found them out, and *a more excellent way* was opened.

The Bible is God's oracle. It is a *living* oracle, not a dumb or dead one. It has a voice for every man in every circumstance. Men gather round it day by day from East and West, men of diverse race and lineage and speech, of various tastes and habits and circumstances; and to each one it speaks audibly; to each one it speaks individually, and it speaks decisively. All our difficulties, all our perplexities, all our intricate and secret distresses, we may bring them to the Bible, and we shall find our way.

But how does it do this? Are we, like the superstitious of other days, to open our Bible at random, and take the first verse which meets us as our guide? Or is one who has neglected his Bible through long days of prosperity, to read it for the first time in his trouble, and be sure of a clear and loud response? God cares more for us than to give us this sort of ready-made, indolent direction. The oracle itself is vocal only to the wise; only, that is, to those who daily visit it, and seek to frame life and speech, thought and action, habitually by its rule. If a man complains that he gets no good from his Bible, depend upon it, that man does not read it; does not read it regularly, or does not read it upon his knees. It is by visiting

our oracle daily, even as we daily need guidance; it is by coming to it as to God's presence, not superstitiously indeed, but reverently and devoutly; it is by living much in that heavenly atmosphere, becoming used to it so that its tone and its air shall be ours, its mode of judging of men and things familiar and at last habitual to us; it is by so reading God's Word as that what it reveals it reveals to us, and what it enjoins it enjoins upon us, and what it promises it promises to us; it is in this way that the dead page starts into life, and the black ink into a voice, and the written word into a quickening spirit, so that at last its principles are our principles, and its judgments our judgments, and its ways of thinking (which are God's ways) ours: and then insensibly we begin to view each particular occurrence as God views it, and to hear each call of duty as God utters it: the things that are seen shrink into their due dimensions beside things that are not seen, and time becomes as nothing in the light of eternity, and misfortune which has chastened is honestly felt to have been a blessing, and disappointment which makes earth blank makes heaven bright to us: and on the other hand, sin which has brought its pleasures

is looked upon as a twofold evil, and duty which has had its hardships is welcomed as a double good: and then at length the soul which has learned God's language is fitted to converse with God, and the life which has been transformed is ready to be transplanted, and a well-known voice is heard saying, *Come up hither, and I will show thee things which must be hereafter!*

God grant, my brethren, to each one of us, so to use this treasure which is in our hands, whether hitherto shut or open, that we may find it vocal to us in His name! And to those who have it not, or who use it not, or from ignorance cannot use, ye, who have freely received, as freely give! That so, in God's good time, we may be a people fearing Him and working righteousness; a Church and a Nation to which the promise has at length been verified, *I will dwell in them and walk in them, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God!*

LECTURE XV.

THE FIRST MARTYRDOM.

ACTS VII. 60.

And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

THE subject which lies now before us is the record of a martyrdom; the violent and suffering end of the first Christian man who was called to give his life for the testimony of Jesus.

As they heard these things, they were cut to the heart—sawn asunder in their hearts is the exact expression—*and they gnashed* (or *ground*) *their teeth against* (*upon*, or *at*) *him. But being full of the Holy Ghost*—and the word used implies not that he became so for once, but that he was already and habitually so—*he fixed a stedfast gaze upon the heaven, and saw a glory of God*, a bright light such as that

which in the tabernacle of old betokened God's immediate presence, *and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. And he said, Lo, I behold the heavens opened asunder, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God. And they cried with a loud voice, and stopped their ears,* that they might escape the sound which they deemed blasphemy, *and rushed with one accord upon him, and having cast him out without the city they proceeded to stone him. And the witnesses,* those of whom we read in the 6th chapter, as suborned to charge him with blasphemy, *laid aside their garments at the feet of a young man called Saul.*

It was the rule of the Law of Moses, *At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death. The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people.* And so in this case the letter of the Law was strictly kept, while its spirit was so cruelly outraged.

The exertion of stoning required that the loose outer garment should be thrown off; and in this instance it is specially recorded, for the instruction of the Church of all time, that the person who took charge of the clothes

of the witnesses, during this terrible execution, and thus proved himself to be the partisan and abettor of the deed, was a young man named Saul; now first mentioned in the sacred story, but destined to fill afterwards its largest and most illustrious page, under the new name and in the new character of the blessed and holy Apostle St Paul.

And they stoned Stephen—it was a long and dreadful process, and they went through with it; first the witnesses, and then the excited and infuriated crowd—*while he called upon*—the word *God*, you observe, which follows in our Version, is not in the original; and the remainder of the sentence bids us rather to supply the name of our Lord Jesus—*while he called upon (invoked) and said, Lord Jesus receive my spirit. And he kneeled down*, in the midst of that cruel hail of missiles under which his life was gradually sinking, *and cried with a loud voice, Lord, weigh not to them*, place not in the scales against them, *this sin. And having said this, he fell asleep.*

God give us grace to lay to heart some of these touching and solemn lessons!

1. We are called to notice one effect of divine truth upon sinful men. We are apt to

suppose that, where truth does not save, it does nothing. We are in the habit, ourselves, too often, of listening to God's Word with the outward ear, without giving it any entrance. In this manner many of us have heard, I dare say, a thousand Sermons in the last ten years, of which not only we retain no impression, but we never received any. The preacher might gather hope from hearing that a Sermon had made one of his audience angry. There are those whom God's truth faithfully spoken ought to make angry. Those whom it does not instruct, it ought to irritate. This torpid, lifeless acquiescence, which is the common spirit of hearing, is a terrible sign, when we compare the hearing with the living. It was not so always. When an Apostle preached, some were converted, and the rest were angered. That was because there was a reality in the message. It came home. It could not be quietly stowed away amongst other neglected lumber in the memory or in the conscience. It was felt to have a life in it, and where it did not quicken, it stung.

Observe the strength of the expression here used in describing the effect of Stephen's defence upon his accusers and his judges. *They*

were cut to the heart. But it is even more than this: *they were sawn asunder in their hearts.* In the list of martyrdoms recorded in the 11th chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, this phrase occurs; *they were sawn asunder.* It was one horrible kind of martyrdom, to which saints of old were subjected. But here the martyr himself is said thus to torture his hearers. *As they heard, they were sawn asunder in their hearts.* It is just the description of the effect of the ministry of the two witnesses in the figurative language of the 11th chapter of the Revelation of St John. *They that dwell upon the earth shall rejoice over them,* when they are at last slain, *and make merry, and shall send gifts one to another; because these two prophets tormented them that dwelt on the earth.* The word of God spoken by their lips had been as fire and sword in the hearts of the unbelieving. *They were sawn asunder in their hearts, and they ground their teeth at him* in their fury. Wherever else in Holy Scripture this figure occurs, the grinding or gnashing of the teeth for pain and rage, it is in connection with the future punishment of the wicked. *There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* It is as though the very torment of

hell were begun on earth beneath the faithful and powerful ministry of the Divine Word. There is *gnashing of teeth* at it already.

And is that the word which we hear, which we preach? O, it is a grave question both for us and you! Well do you know that this is not the effect which the minister would desire, in this beloved congregation, for the word spoken. Not this: the very opposite of this. But only we would pray God that the effect be not nothing; powerful neither way; merely negative, merely nugatory, merely soporific. If we cannot see fruits of life, we would rather see anything come of it than nothing. But, to do this, the word must be first true, and next it must be brought home. The mere proclamation of sin and salvation, in general terms, will not anger any man; neither perhaps, in these days, will it arouse any man. We must pray for grace to speak as St Stephen did, plainly, sometimes severely, always without regard to prepossessions and prejudices, be they ever so universal or ever so inveterate; to tell, as he did, of that hardness of heart which is ever resisting the Holy Ghost; of that coming demolition of all human hopes and human trusts, which will *try every man's work,*

as by fire, *of what sort it is;* and more especially of that spiritual worship, and that spiritual life, which alone God, who is a Spirit, can accept or bless, when He *comes,* year after year, *seeking fruit on this fig-tree,* and alas! too often, too often, *finding none.*

2. There is one figure, more especially, in this motley throng, on which the eye must dwell for a moment before we fix every thought on the central form itself. That young man whose name is Saul; an educated, reflecting, moral man; familiar with God's Law and God's Word from his childhood; living already, living habitually, as he afterwards tells us, *in all good conscience* towards God and man; and yet an unbeliever in Jesus; and yet a hater of the light; and yet a persecutor of the saints: what a study is he for the thoughtful! what a warning, in one sense, to the religious! You see what the force of prejudice is; what the strength of early habit, of long association, of general opinion in the particular world (great or small) which is *our* world. Even conscience, you perceive, is not an infallible guide: conscience itself may be culpably unenlightened; left by our own fault uninformed as to things true, as to facts and occurrences which should

change the whole course of our being: and if this is so, then we may walk each day by the light of conscience, and yet be all the time *a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious;* a waster of the true Church of God; and have to speak, in after life, if a total change should have been vouchsafed to us, of *sinners of whom I am chief.* Saul, the moral, the conscientious; the diligent student, the scrupulous worshipper; *was consenting* at this time *to the death* of Stephen, and *keeping the raiment of them that slew him.* Let us all pray, as for a clear, so also for an enlightened conscience. Can we not all enter into the feeling with which Paul the Apostle, looking back upon the earlier life of Saul the persecutor, prayed for his converts, that they might *prove things that differ,* and *approve things that are excellent;* that they *might be filled with the knowledge of God's will, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, that* so *they might walk worthy of the Lord, unto all pleasing?* For lack of this he was still fighting against that God whom he daily worshipped and daily sought to serve.

3. And now let us devote the moments which remain, to the contemplation of that saint and servant of the Lord whose cruel yet

glorious end is here set before us. Let us strive so to enter into his faith and hope and charity, that we may all follow him, in life and in death, even as he first followed Christ.

His testimony is now all but ended. But one chapter before, we heard of him for the first time, as *a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, full of grace and power,* set apart, by the choice of the congregation, and by the laying on of the Apostles' hands, to a humble but blessed office in the ministry of the infant Church of Christ. We know not how long he laboured in that service; less, we are left to suppose, than one whole year: and yet those few weeks or months, what a trace have they left behind them! what a trace, and what a testimony! We seem already to see something of the meaning of those words of St Peter, *One day is with the Lord as a thousand years.* It is a great encouragement to activity *while it is called Today.* There may be scarcely a tomorrow for us below: then let today be vigorous! Put nothing off that can be done for Christ. Complain, if you will, of the shortness of your day, but never of its weariness. Think how Stephen, just because he was full of grace and therefore full of power, *did great*

wonders and miracles among the people, though his career was to be cut short as in a moment, by an end which seemed to speak only of disappointment and of defeat.

That was the testimony of his life; his brief Christian life, and his humble Christian ministry; in itself a mere *serving of tables* to lighten the Apostles' toil. And now for his death: how did he who had *magnified Christ by life* magnify Him also *by death*, and both alike *in his body?*

(1) First then, he never lost faith. He did not say to himself, *All these things are against me.* He did not say to himself, If Christ had designed to own my work, He would not thus have cut it short. He did not say, If this be the manner in which Christ's cause prospers below, how can I believe that He Himself lives and reigns above? None of these things. Never was his faith so strong, or his vision so unclouded, as in that last clamorous, riotous scene in which life itself was to be sacrificed. While his enemies are rushing upon him with one accord, his eyes are fixed stedfastly on heaven: he is rapt above earth and earthly things, and privileged to behold in clear and bright vision his beloved

Master Himself standing in manifested glory at the right hand of God. He sees Him, not seated in royal dignity, but standing as in act to succour; and bears one last, one crowning witness to His risen life, to His resistless power, to His omnipresent grace. He said, *Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God.*

(2) And then with what a hopefulness of mind, and with what a quietness of spirit, does he address himself to this sudden, this cruel, this shameful suffering! In the midst of the uproar of angry voices, and of the flight of blinding, stupefying, crushing stones, he has a majesty of meekness and a power of prayer not given to others in seasons of tranquillity and of repose. All the time, he is calling upon his Master, and saying, *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.* Not in the manner in which men use that sacred name, of God or of Christ, as a mere expression of pain or disquietude or weakness; or in the ignorant ejaculations sometimes heard from a sinner's deathbed, when for the first time he feels himself in the grasp of a mightier power, which must be propitiated by abject invocation: not thus, but in the tone of one who *knows in whom he has believed,*

and is persuaded that He is able to keep that deposit, which he has long ago committed to Him, *against the day of His appearing and His kingdom. Lord Jesus*—my Master, my Lord, my Ruler and my Possessor, already; long known, long trusted in, and now not doubted; Thou who didst bear my nature, and undergo more than all my suffering; Thou who wast named Jesus at Thy birth below, in testimony that Thou couldest save Thy people, first from the death of the soul, and then also at last in and from the death of the body—*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit! today* let me *be with Thee in Paradise! into thy hands,* as Thou once upon the cross into Thy Father's, *I commend my spirit, for Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, Thou God of truth! and so shall I ever be with my Lord!*

So then, my brethren, we may speak to Christ as to God. Whatsoever we would ask of the Father, we may ask of Him. And when we come to die, we may set before our mind's eye the person of the Son of God and Son of Man, and be assured that in leaning upon that arm of power, in trusting in that heart of love, we are but following His direction and obeying His command who would have *all men*

honour the Son even as they honour the Father. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

(3) And as we dwell upon the two other attributes, of faith and hope, so may we notice, in the last place, the example here given us of an exhaustless charity. As the end approaches; as the buffeted, tortured, mangled frame begins to totter to its dissolution; the dying martyr kneels down upon the blood-stained earth, and collects every energy of soul and body for one last, one crowning act of worship. That posture with which we allow any little excuse to interfere, that reverent bending of the knee in God's worship, which many of us never practise even in God's House, which few of us would practise in a season of pain or sickness, he deemed the fittest attitude even for a dying man: he would honour God with his body as well as with the spirit: and then, with a loud voice, the last utterance below of that testimony to which life had been devoted, he cries aloud, in the hearing of his enemies themselves as they stand with uplifted hands around, still thirsting for his blood, *Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!* He prays not, as some have done, that the murderers may find out their sin one day in

punishment: he prays not even that the blood shed this day may produce a speedy and an abundant harvest: but he prays that that cruel deed which is still running on to its accomplishment may never be weighed in God's balances against the souls of its perpetrators. Thus he prayed; and in one case at least we know that his prayer was heard and answered. There was one at least among those murderers, to whom God afterwards *granted* the grace of *repentance unto life*, and who now for many centuries has rested with his victim, loved and loving, in the everlasting joys and the perfect charities of heaven. The prayer of the dying, we may well believe, is not the least but the most fruitful in legacies of conversion and salvation to the living. O let us, in life and in death, be diligent to use, one for another, the availing arm of intercession!

(4) *And when he had said this, he fell asleep.* What a word to apply to a death so violent and so suffering! *He fell asleep. He was laid to rest. He was lulled to slumber.* The word itself is enough to take the sting from death. If that is all that death is to the Christian, surely we may fear it too much. But, alas! the use of a word is not enough to

deprive the king of terrors of his power to harm. We have all caught this tone about death. We speak indiscriminately of men going to their rest. Our word *cemetery* is borrowed from the same Greek term which is here employed to express the death of Stephen, and means literally a sleeping-place, a place of slumber and of repose. And yet dare we hope that all who are laid in that burial-ground are indeed sleeping in Jesus? Is that the hope which truly comforts every mourner, as he turns away from the grave in which his buried treasure lies?

The case of St Stephen himself may assure us that no circumstances of death can prevent its being this to a Christian. No anguish of pain, no confusion of surrounding sights and sounds, no mocking taunts and no assailing hands. It matters not whether the cause of death be disease or accident, the weapon of war or the stroke of the executioner. It matters not whether the scene of death be the house or the road-side, the field of battle or the desolate prison-house. These things do not either make or mar the true cemetery, the true sleeping-place of the Christian. When St Stephen at last breathed out his soul from

a bruised and disfigured and mangled body, amidst shouts of execration and hands raised in murder, it is written of him in the words now before us, that *he fell asleep.*

Now it is a profitable question for our last this evening, For whom is death a sleep? Who amongst us can look forward to an end thus described? Let us ask the question, each one of himself, and also answer it, while to do so may still be salutary and not terrifying. There are three conditions of such a death.

i. It must be *a rest from labour.*

Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: Even so, saith the Spirit; for they rest from their labours, and their works do follow them. An idle, desultory, self-indulgent life has earned no rest. Night may come to such a life; but not the sweet sleep of the diligent, not the profound dreamless repose of the healthily wearied labourer.

Again, a rest from what labour? Not from common worldly occupations, such as *have their reward* (if anywhere) here, and have nothing stored up for them in the world unseen. Not from the eager pursuit of riches or pleasures or honours, which, whether found or not found, are at least bounded and limited by the horizon

of earth. Not from these labours does he rest in death, who, like the blessed saint before us, then falls asleep. He who would rest in Christ must first have wrought in Christ. It is Christ's labourer, not the world's, who, when he dies, falls asleep. Now therefore are we, in the present, working for Christ? Is He daily called in to bless our toil? remembered each morning at the outset of toil, as the alone Guardian and Guide and Lord? remembered each day in the midst of toil, as its sustainer, its object, and its sanctifier? remembered each night, at the close of toil, as its alone end and rest and *exceeding great reward?* If this be so, day by day; if this principle be thoroughly acted upon, in what it prompts and in what it precludes, through the days of health and activity; then indeed we may hope, when we die, not to perish, but to fall asleep.

ii. Again, it must be a *rest with Christ.*

When St Paul thought or spoke of dying, it was always in this connection. *I have a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better. While we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. We are willing rather to be absent from the body, and* (as a necessary consequence) *to be present with*

the Lord. He who *falls asleep* in death must go, consciously and believingly, to be for ever with the Lord. *Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise.*

iii. Finally, it is a condition of sleep that it be a *rest unto rising.*

The chief reason for its being a name of death is, that the Christian's death implies and involves a resurrection. *Jesus and the resurrection* was the sum of St Paul's doctrine. *The hope of Israel* he called it; *the hope of the promise made of God unto the fathers.* A sleep not to be again broken is death, not sleep. A sleep only to be broken by terrific suffering is no sleep: it is a frightful dream, a horrible nightmare. Such is the death of the wicked; of him who through life has kept and loved his sins, and dies to *give account to Him who is the Judge of quick and dead.* God keep us all from such a life, and from such an end! May He give us rather such a deathbed as we have seen ere now in the exercise of our ministry; a protracted season, it may be, of acute bodily torture which rests not night nor day, yet, withal, of so sweet a peace, of so deep a joy, of so overflowing a thankfulness, that to enter that chamber is to lift the latch, for a

moment, of the very gate of heaven, and to hear by anticipation the echoes of that world, in which the work of praise is the enjoyment of the blessed, and in which every tongue has learned the new song, *Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing!* Of that man, when he dies, the words will indeed be verified, *He served his generation by the will of God, and then fell on sleep. When he had said this, he fell asleep.* Which one of us shall not answer—God grant that it be truly said of each one of us when our great change comes—*Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well?*

LECTURE XVI.

GOSPEL JOY.

ACTS VIII. 8.

And there was great joy in that city.

THE servants of God *live though they die.* And this, not only in reference to that world which they then first enter; but also in reference to this world which they then finally quit. What is said of one of these, is true more or less of all, *He, being dead, yet speaketh.*

It was so with that remarkable man whose life and death have occupied us on three late occasions. The passage before us illustrates the old saying, that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Stephen, after that unjust accusation, that bold defence, and that cruel execution, of which we have been reading, is not yet done with: that sacred stream did

but water the soil on which it was poured, and a tenfold harvest of good soon waved and whitened, ripened and was gathered, on the ground now wet with that blood which was his life.

The first words indeed of this 8th chapter tell of nothing but calamity to the young Church of Christ. But calamity itself, in God's hand, may be anything rather than an unmixed evil: and so it was here.

And Saul was consenting to his slaughter. He uses the same word himself, in the 22nd chapter of this book, in converse with his Lord and Master, with reference to this very time. *When the blood of Thy martyr Stephen was (being) shed, I also myself was standing by and consenting [unto his death], and keeping the garments of those who were slaying him.* It is a very strong word, expressive of hearty approval and thorough sympathy. It is the word by which the same Apostle describes the worst sign of all in the heathen world in its lowest degradation; *who, knowing well the sentence of God, that they who do such things are worthy of death, not only do them, but even consent unto (have pleasure in) them that do them.* In this sense it is written here, that *Saul was consenting unto (taking pleasure in) the murder* of

the holy Stephen. What he saw of his fervent faith, his deep piety, and his marvellous love, produced at the time no impression. Hard indeed is man's heart till God softens it. And marvellous is the change which God can work and does work in the hardest heart, when He is pleased to *command the light to shine out of darkness.* That time, for Saul, was not yet.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the Christian *congregation in Jerusalem.* This first taste of blood only whetted the appetite of the persecutors. That day was the beginning of a changed order of things for the infant Church. Hitherto there had been no general feeling against it on the part of the people. The very rulers had had to think twice before they lifted a hand against the Apostles. But human nature, as it acts in masses, is a very capricious thing: with Christ Himself it had been, in that selfsame populace, *Hosanna now, tomorrow Crucify:* and as with the Lord, so was it to be in all things with His servants. The martyrdom of Stephen was the signal for a general persecution.

And all were dispersed throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, and further still, as we shall presently learn, *except the Apostles.*

They remained for the present at head quarters, to be the central authority, the general referees, and the wise and watchful counsellors, of the whole body.

And devout men joined in burying Stephen, and made a great wailing over him. This word *devout* is applied, in St Luke's Gospel, to the aged Symeon. *The same man was just and devout.* It is applied, in the narrative of the day of Pentecost, to the persons who were gathered together by the rumour of the great miracle. *There were, dwelling at Jerusalem, Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.* The same term is used in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in reference to our Lord Himself praying in His agony in the garden of Gethsemane; *He was heard in that He feared; heard,* as it might more exactly be rendered, *from* (in consequence of) *His devoutness.* There is no reason therefore for restricting it here, as some would do, to Jewish proselytes not yet converted to the Gospel; though it might well be that, as Stephen appears (from his name, as well as from circumstances attending his appointment in the 6th chapter) to have belonged to the Hellenistic rather than the Hebrew portion of the Church, so the task

of doing honour to his lifeless body may have been undertaken by persons of the same section; that, namely, which was composed of Greek-speaking Jews, and not of Jews who had adhered to their national home and tongue.

We love to believe, at all events, that these *devout men* were believers, like him whom they mourned; and that we see here the sanction of Apostolical times given to that mourning over deceased friends, which nature prompts and which grace should only regulate and soften. There are Christian tears over the dead, as well as tears of uncontrolled passion: there is a sorrowing *as without hope,* and there is a sorrowing full of hope, a sorrowing bright with immortality.

The sacred record will not let us forget Saul. Soon he is to become its one topic: and it is as though the force of that contrast must be heightened by every just aggravation of his previous condition and character. While the lamentations of the devout are still resounding over the humble grave of St Stephen, Saul was the chief actor in a widely different scene. *But Saul was making havoc of the congregation;* was maltreating and outraging, by all

manner of violence, the members of the Christian Church at Jerusalem; *entering into their several houses; and dragging (away) both men and women gave them over into custody.* There was no pretence of legality in such proceedings: but he had the rulers with him in this mad career, and could rely confidently upon their connivance. We can never read these narratives of the persecutions of other days, without asking ourselves with all seriousness, (1) whether, if the profession of the Gospel involved such consequences for us, we can at all imagine ourselves maintaining our constancy as Christ's disciples; and (2) whether we ever remember to give God thanks for securing to us of this land and age the peaceful exercise of our religion; for so *ordering by His Providence the course of this world, that His Church* now *may joyfully serve Him in all godly quietness, no man forbidding them.*

And now we are to see a Divine hand overruling for good all this suffering.

They then that were dispersed went about proclaiming the glad tidings of the Word. The Word is God's message; the announcement which God makes when, as *in these last days,* He *speaks to us in His Son.* And this word

is described as a *Gospel:* those who proclaim it proclaim *glad tidings.* Is that our idea of preaching and of hearing? Do we speak and do we listen, as if that which is being said were, as it ought to be, something not only true, not only important, but attractive and joyful too?

For a short time now the attention is to be directed to a new actor.

And Philip came down to a city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Christ. This is not Philip the Apostle, but that Philip who (together with Stephen) was one of the seven men chosen in the 6th chapter to assist the Apostles in the daily distribution. At a later time, in the 21st chapter, he is described as *Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven. He came down,* from Jerusalem the capital, *to a* (not the) *city of Samaria;* to some town, not named, in the region of Samaria; *and* there *began to proclaim to them,* as with the voice of a herald, summoning men to the Christian race and the Christian prize—such is the force of the original expression—began to act as the herald to them, not of a mere doctrine or a historical fact, but of a Person; even of Him, whose coming was the one hope of the world, the Messiah or Christ,

the anointed Prophet and Priest and King of Israel and of the world. That was his subject. He *preached Christ unto them.*

And not without success. *And the multitudes,* who formed the population of that city, *attended to the things spoken by Philip, with one accord, as they heard* his words *and saw the signs which he did.* As it is said of the first convert at Philippi some years afterwards, when Paul was the preacher, *the Lord opened* their *hearts, that* they *attended to those things which were spoken.* It was not a mere assertion, to which they listened. *Not in word only, but also in power and in demonstration of the Spirit,* did Philip speak now, as Paul afterwards. The people not only heard his word, but they *saw the signs which he did.*

For from many, the narrative proceeds, *who had unclean spirits, they* (the evil spirits) *crying with a loud voice,* in token of reluctance and of compulsion, *came out: and many paralyzed and lame persons were healed.* Thus God gave testimony in this new place to the Word of life. Persons tortured by the actual possession of evil spirits, were delivered from them in virtue of that voice which used the all-availing name of Christ. *Sitting at the feet* of

their deliverer, *clothed and in their right mind,* they became witnesses to all men of the presence of His grace before whom the devils themselves tremble. And bodily cures also, in the form of deliverances from lameness and from paralysis, accompanied the other; that the very senses of men might be able to attest the reality of the Divine working.

And there arose much joy in that city.

Now let us gather up the chief topics of these few words.

1. It is the will of God to propagate His Son's Gospel. It is His intention that it should spread; and in all ways, through circumstances adverse to it or prosperous, He gives it free course. Sometimes it is by opening the commerce of nations, so that the messengers of salvation may occupy new fields, and (in a larger sense than before) *sow beside all waters.* Sometimes it is by suffering a short-lived triumph to the enemies of the truth; so that some spark from a martyr's pile may kindle a fire, in a land or in a heart, which by God's grace shall never be put out. It has been thus in all times. And great as has been the effect of the protection and patronage of kings and queens as the nursing fathers and mothers of the

Church below, we may boldly say that it has been as nothing, in the long run, in comparison with that *constancy of faith even unto death*, of which all great epochs of the Church have furnished examples, even as the history of St Stephen himself was its first and most memorable instance. *They who were dispersed abroad, in the persecution which arose about Stephen, went everywhere preaching the word.* And by degrees the story of his life and of his death became incorporated in the word which they preached; and men were emboldened by that great example to look up to heaven in their own sufferings for the truth, and by faith to see that heaven opened, and Jesus Himself standing at the right hand of God. This was all that remained of the effects of the first Christian persecution; an added testimony, a wider circulation, and a more decided devotion.

Though we are not called, in these quiet times, to give our bodies to be burned for the testimony of the truth, yet we are called every one of us to assist in propagating the Gospel, not only by such offerings of gold and silver as are from time to time asked of us in that behalf, but even more, by so living and so dying

as that others may take knowledge of us that we believe that which we profess, and love that which we believe. *This is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning us.* It is His will to propagate His Son's Gospel, from land to land, and not less from heart to heart.

2. But what is this Gospel? It is described in two expressions.

(1) First it is called *the word.* They *went everywhere preaching the word.* What is a word? It is the utterance of a mind. It is the communication of something first conceived. It is the expression of thought, of intention, of purpose, of determination. In its simplest and most general definition, it is, reason communicating itself. Do we indeed believe that the Gospel is this? the expression of God's mind concerning us? the communication of His will, of His purpose, of His thought, so far as it affects us His human creation? It is a grand, a glorious view, which is thus opened. God has spoken; spoken concerning us, and spoken to us. That silence which had lasted from Creation is at length broken. That mystery which for ages and generations had enveloped the ulterior designs of the Almighty Creator touching His rebellious creatures, is at last revealed,

unveiled, disclosed, laid open. God has spoken; and what He has spoken is a Word. He has announced to us the forgiveness of sins through a Mediator and a Sacrifice. He has announced to us the sanctification of sinners, their recreation in His own lost image, by means of an indwelling Holy Spirit, Himself God and from God. He has announced to us that prayer, which is only speaking to Him in the heart, is the one connecting link between us and these two unspeakable gifts. And He has announced to us that it is His intention, when the fulness of the time shall come, to raise the dead and to change the living, so that the one and the other may be capable of an immortal existence, the character of which, for happiness or misery, will depend upon the mind here formed in us, and the life here led by us, as individual beings, capable of choice, and responsible for making it. These things are amongst the disclosures embodied in that Word, or message, or communication from God, which these dispersed disciples preached throughout Judea and Samaria, and which we, if we be faithful to our commission, are preaching still and still hearing.

(2) But, as they preached *the Word,* so Philip preached *Christ.* He *went down to a*

city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. There was no contrariety, no difference, between the two Gospels. Christ *is* the Word. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* Jesus Christ is so designated, because He is the utterer, the communicator, the Revealer of God. *No man hath seen God at any time: the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.* The Word *is* Christ. To preach *Christ,* in His person, in His character, in His work; in His example and in His atonement, and in His Priesthood; in His two comings, and in His three comings; His coming to bear the sin of the world, His coming by the Spirit to the individual soul, and His coming in glorious majesty to judge the quick and the dead, and finally to establish His kingdom which is righteousness and peace and joy; this is to proclaim God's *Word* also, in its simplicity, in its fulness, and in its strength.

Is this the Gospel which we preach? Is this the Gospel *which ye have received and wherein ye stand?*

3. And now, thirdly, as to the credentials of this Gospel: how is it proved?

When we preach the Word, or (which is the same thing) when we preach Christ, in a new place, or in one which has long had the light of life, how do we establish it? To what do we appeal as its basis of proof? No doubt we go back to the evidences: we speak of God's triple seal, of goodness, wisdom, and power, as set to the words and works below of Jesus Christ our Lord. These arguments are never worn out: nor can it ever be safe to disuse them, so long as one unbeliever remains, unconvinced and unconverted, amongst our people. But when our Lord said, *These signs shall follow them that believe,* He taught us to look for more than a mere historical proof, on which to build, for practical purposes, the fabric of our demonstration. When Philip preached in a city of Samaria, certain results followed: evil spirits came out of many, palsied limbs regained strength, and *the lame man* (in the language of ancient prophecy) *leaped as an hart.* Thus he could appeal to effects, and say, Judge ye whether a doctrine which brings with it these infallible signs, be indeed of man or of God. We are in one sense less fortunate. These visible tokens do not now attend our preaching. Not, as we hope, from any fault in the message

or (necessarily) in the messenger, but of God's all-wise will, are these demonstrations of His power now withheld. We ought not to want them: and *if we hear not Moses and the prophets,* if we refuse the holy doctrine of Christ and the Apostles, neither should we be influenced by any outward sign; *neither should we be persuaded though one rose from the dead.* These are not the signs for which we look and would pray in our hearers. But a changed life, an altered spirit; the leaving off of known sins, the correction of evil tempers, the eradication of hurtful lusts; the formation of Christian habits, and the diligent use of Christ's ordinances; *the table of devils* deserted, and the Table of the Lord frequented by humble and thronging worshippers; these are the true proofs of the Gospel Word in our days; by these things other men take knowledge of its power and of its virtue; in them do unbelieving men read the sure record of their condemnation, and the trembling fearful conscience the assurance of a free forgiveness for all who will *enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.* God give us in this place clearer signs, such as these, of the truth of the word preached, and make that word more and more

identical with the proclamation of Christ Himself as *the Way, the Truth, and the Life!*

4. Finally, the text itself tells us what ought to be the effect of the proclamation, in any place, of the true and lively Word. *There was great joy in that city.* It is long, we may fear, since in any whole place there was joy on account of the Gospel. One here, and another there; it is much if a long ministry shows fifty or even ten souls really brought to peace, and so to joy, by means of the preaching of the Word in any one Parish. We must go to humbler things, if we would speak probably. Let me ask then as to the individual soul, Which of you, my friends, knows what joy is in things spiritual? Which of you, in days of health and prosperity, finds any portion of his happiness simply in Christ? Which of you, in days of sickness and disappointment, in days when the lights of earth are darkened, does not find to his consternation that the light of heaven is gone out too? Not only in the city therefore, but in the heart also, there is no real joy, not even any real comfort, in the Word, in Christ. Joy is a very strong word. It is the overflowing of happiness. It is the exuberance, the redundancy, the efflorescence, of a comfort and a tran-

quillity habitually felt within. O where is Christian joy in these hearts of ours? such joy as that of which St Paul wrote, when he said, *Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice?* or St John, *These things write we unto you, that your joy may be full?* or our Lord Himself, *These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full?* Levity there may be, and too much of it; wit pungent or boisterous, sporting sometimes even with holy things; cheerful spirits in some, domestic happiness in some, contentment and even thankfulness in a few: but where amongst us is that grace of Christian joy which seemed to flow so naturally, in other days, out of the very first reception of the tidings of a Saviour? *He went on his way rejoicing. There was great joy in that city. Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.* Let us pray, as for the first elements and rudiments of a true Christian faith, so also for its developement in us, and for its perfection; its perfection in a sober, a chastened, yet an abiding joy; in a happiness not only felt within, but expressed in every look and in every step and in every word without. Such joy lies nearer

to any one of us than we imagine: sin forgiven, an evil spirit expelled; the atonement believed in, embraced, lived upon; the Holy Spirit sought, cherished, rested in for strength and grace; it is the natural effect of these things to inspire joy also: ask of God the power to grasp them as realities, and joy will enter with them; a joy not of this world, a joy the very foretaste of heaven.

LECTURE XVII.

THE SIN OF SIMON.

ACTS VIII. 22.

Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.

IN God's hand, we have seen, all things work for good. Prosperity and adversity, honour and dishonour, life and death, all alike serve Him.

If persecution springs out of martyrdom, still His overruling hand can make both the one and the other a help to the Gospel and a testimony to the truth. *They that were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen, went everywhere preaching the word.*

Samaria was the first field thus opened. *Philip the evangelist, one of the seven*, went down

thither and proclaimed Christ to them. We have heard what his message was, how supported, and by what signs followed. Diseases of body, and diseases of soul, fled, as ever, at the healing word of Christ. *And there was great joy in that city.*

Now we are to see the Gospel in one of its conflicts; one of those unexpected and insidious attacks, which try most severely the strength of the truth, but out of which God's overruling hand ever brings victory for those who trust in Him and fear not.

But a certain man, by name Simon, was beforehand in the city, practising sorcery, and astounding the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was some great one; to whom they attended—it is the same word used in the 6th verse with reference to the effect of Philip's preaching, *the people with one accord gave heed* (or *attended*) *to those things which Philip spake—from small to great,* all ranks and all ages alike, *saying, This man is that power of God which is called great.* If we may believe the fragments of information which we have concerning this Simon, he seems to have given himself out as an incarnation of the Almighty power of God. *And they attended to him, because for*

a long time he had astounded them by his sorceries. But when they believed Philip announcing the glad tidings concerning the kingdom of God and the name, the revealed character, *of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.* They passed under a new and mightier influence, and were unable to resist the call, *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.*

A strange result followed. *And Simon, himself also, believed; and having been baptized he attended constantly upon Philip,* he remained stedfast in his attendance upon Philip's ministry—it is the same expression which occurs in the 2nd chapter with regard to the converts on the day of Pentecost, *they attended constantly upon the Apostles' doctrine (teaching)—and beholding miracles,* manifestations of power, *and signs taking place he was astounded.* Here was conviction, confession, attention, acquiescence in loss of power and precedence, change of opinions, change of habits: what lacked he yet?

And the Apostles in Jerusalem—all were scattered abroad, the 1st verse of the chapter told us, *except the Apostles,* who remained in Jerusalem, ready for any such emergency as now arose—*on hearing that Samaria had re-*

ceived the word of God, sent to them Peter and John, on a special mission of enquiry and action; *who went down,* from the capital, *and prayed concerning them that they might receive the Holy Spirit: for not even yet had He fallen upon any one of them, but only they were already baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.* They were already possessed of the elementary grace of the Spirit; they had *repentance unto life;* they had faith in Christ, and the spirit of prayer; but they had not yet received the Pentecostal gift, with its higher and deeper indwelling, as well as its outward manifestation in signs of power. *Then laid they their hands upon them, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

Now let us observe the effect of this event upon one professed member of the Church.

And when Simon saw that by means of the laying on of the hands of the Apostles the Spirit was given—was being given, given in one case after another—*he offered them money, saying, Give me also this authority,* this which I see to be your peculiar endowment, *that on whomsoever I have laid my hands he may receive the Holy Spirit.* He desired to purchase with money the Apostolical power of communicating (instrumentally) the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

Thus was brought out, in a form not offensive only but blasphemous, the mercenary spirit of the man. Money was his god. He judged of others by himself; sought to bribe the Apostles to share their commission with him; and indicated by an infallible sign the gross earthliness of his whole conception of the work and of the character of God.

But Peter said to him, Thy money be with thee unto destruction—away with thy money, thy *mammon of unrighteousness,* intruding itself into the affairs of God and eternity; may it perish, as thou wilt *except thou repent—because thou didst think to acquire by means of money the gift of God. Thou hast not part nor lot,* neither share nor inheritance, *in this word,* in this matter in question; *for thy heart is not straight,* is not direct, straightforward, upright, but crooked and insincere, *before* (*in the sight of*) *God. Repent therefore from*—so as to turn away, to escape, from—*this thy wickedness, and pray the Lord, if then*—if as the result of that prayer—*the device of thy heart shall be dismissed* (*forgiven*) *for thee: for I see that thou art unto* (involved in) *a* very *gall of bitterness,* a concentration and focus of bitterness; even of that state of sin, which, however it may regard it-

self, is indeed *an evil thing and bitter—and bond (fetter) of iniquity.* I see that thy case is one of deadly disease; that thou canst not *deliver thy soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?* Thy only chance is prayer; prayer for a free forgiveness, prayer for a renewing Spirit.

And Simon answered and said, Pray ye for me to the Lord, that nothing come upon me of the things which ye have said. Ye say, *Pray thou:* I say, *Pray ye!*

They then, having protested (earnestly declared or *asseverated) and spoken the word of the Lord, set out on their return to Jerusalem, and* on their way *evangelized (preached the glad tidings to) many villages of the Samaritans.*

1. On a general view of this passage, notice first the difference between the Gospel miracles and those of a mere magician like this Simon.

Power by itself is an ambiguous sign. There are other powers in the world besides God's. Powers which have broken loose from God. Powers which oppose God's. Powers which God permits, for a time, for the trial of His people, and for the overthrow of those who will not be His people. Such a power was that exercised by this sorcerer. It came, we may

say, by itself; as a disjointed, isolated thing; for the exaltation of a creature; to make beholders say, *This man is the great power of God.* It did not come to attest anything. It did not come to say, I have a message for you from God; and if you ask how you are to know that it is from God, this is the sign. That is the true use of power, in connection with Divine truth. It ought to come as the third part of God's triple seal: first goodness, then wisdom, then power. That was the use which Jesus Christ made of power. He did not come to startle men into acknowledging Him as *the great power of God:* His work did not begin there, nor end there. He began by showing forth in daily life a perfect holiness; an entire self-control and self-devotion; a spotless unimpeachable righteousness of act and word. He fulfilled every relation, He endured every trial, of human life, as no mere man ever did or ever could fulfil or endure each. He drew from His very enemies the confession, *Never man spake like this man.* And then, along with these two (we may presume to say) higher and more unequivocal signs, He also wrought miracles of power; healed disease with a word, stilled wind and wave at His pleasure, cast out

devils, raised the dead. At last, He raised *Himself* from the dead. Now this has never been the order of an impostor. He may astound men, like Simon, by his sorceries; he may avail himself of Satan's strength, and in that strength *do many wonderful works:* but you may be quite sure that he will never use the power of Satan to overthrow Satan's kingdom: nor can he gain from all the powers of darkness skill to clothe himself in the armour of light. He may *bewitch men with sorceries:* but he will never succeed in counterfeiting those other parts of God's seal, which the truly candid and the truly wise will wait for before they call either him or his *the great power of God.*

We are all in danger of too much worshipping power. Money is power, and talent is power, and rank is power, and office is power, and knowledge (above all) is power. But all these things are of the earth, and will perish with the earth. Be not ye led astray. Power-worship is too often devil-worship: this Simon, with all his show, was a creature grovelling and crawling and creeping among things of time and sense. Let the power you worship be all God's power. You will know it by its signs. You will know it by its pointing upwards; by

its drawing you towards holiness, towards good, towards charity, towards heaven, towards God; you will know it by its making the unseen world real to you, and the world of show and semblance less attractive. That is the effect of God's power, as it is reflected even in the poor imperfect characters of His children below: how much more, as it shines in the holy Book, or streams upon us from the mercy-seat above *in the face of Jesus Christ!*

2. Again, we must recognize in this narrative what we are all slow to acquiesce in, the existence amongst us, by Christ's intention, of a Visible as well as an Invisible Church.

We see how men fight against this truth. We have all heard of Christian people endeavouring to make for themselves a circle within a circle, a Church within a Church; a little community, inside the great Church of the baptized and professing Christians, which shall be all sincere, all consistent, all holy, all saved. That has been the origin of most sects in the Church: men have been weary of the formality and hypocrisy and heartlessness which had taken possession of the visible fold below, and have sought to go apart with a few, of whose consistency and devotion they could be assured.

And men will scoff at our Church of England, as having held to the belief that the time for judging is not yet, and the test of judgment in God's hand not ours. If we bury a careless, worldly, or sinful man with words of hope and blessing, because he has never been cast out of the Church by a formal sentence, and must therefore be construed as still belonging to it, however unworthy; you know the outcry which is raised against us by many who ought, we think, to know better; ought, we think, to remember that even in the first days of the Gospel there was a Simon Magus baptized by Philip the Evangelist, and recognized as a member, though an unworthy member, of the Christian community by two of the Apostles themselves. *Let both grow together until the harvest,* is the rule of Divine wisdom as much as of Divine forbearance. If you attempt to judge, you will err both ways: you will often be taken in by loud profession, you will oftener be driven into uncharitableness, into harshness, into injury of souls. Simon was allowed to be baptized, because he said that he was convinced by Philip's miracles that Jesus was Christ. Simon was allowed to attend upon Philip's ministry, and to partake in all the ordinances of Christian com-

munion, on the strength of his own profession, and in the expectation of a higher and a truer judgment.

We do well to allow this latitude to others, and we do well to claim it for ourselves. While the day of grace lasts, we must shut out from hope and from privilege no one who desires and claims either. And if others were to sit in judgment upon us, where should *we* be? How often have we been inconsistent, worldly, careless, sinful! How often must even a human judgment upon us, if it was to be, have been unfavourable, severe, condemning! And yet it would have been the worse for us to be shut out prematurely: we have been the better, every one of us, or we might have been, for that forbearance which has given us time and space for amendment: till the curtain falls upon life's little drama, man is bound to hope, because God has not yet spoken in judgment. May He give us grace to use the opportunity thus vouchsafed!

For indeed we know that, under all this profession, all this which man is bound to respect, and to treat (while he can) as if it were genuine, there is an eye upon the heart. It is not that this unchallenged profession

really implies a favourable issue. There is One who sees all our false ways, and *that which is highly esteemed among men is* often *an abomination in the sight of God.* Yes, we need patience, but we need severity too; patience from others, severity from ourselves, and a union of both from God. We are bold, and we are also timorous; bold in sinning, then timorous in repenting: and we need both the ready baptism of the Evangelist, taking us on our profession, and also the stern rebuke of the Apostle, bidding us to repent deeply of our wickedness, if perhaps the thought of our heart may be forgiven us.

3. Once more, let us ask ourselves what was this particular sin which required in the case before us so stern a reproof. Simon offered money to the Apostles to share their gift with him. He would purchase the Holy Ghost with money. The very idea is blasphemy. We all shrink from it. The law of this land calls a particular offence, that of trafficking in the care of souls, of buying and selling sacred offices in the ministry, by a name derived from that of this man, *Simony.* It were well if that offence were more clearly defined, more strictly interpreted, and less easily evaded. But need I say

that this is not the only nor the chief sense in which we can be guilty of the sin of Simon? We are not tempted to offer money in purchase of God's spiritual gifts: but we are tempted, many of us, to that state of mind out of which Simon's sin, in his ignorant condition, naturally sprang. Simon had that mercenary mind which St Paul calls the *root of all evil.* He thought that money could do anything. He deified money. Knowing what it was to him; how he taught for money, and practised sorcery for money, and aimed at popularity for money, and set himself up as *some great one* for money; he took it for granted that every one else regarded money in the same way: he came to two Apostles, and assumed that they, like himself, thought nothing too great and nothing too holy to be bargained about and trafficked for. Alas! *let him that is without sin among you* in this matter *cast the first stone* at him! Alas! what an idolatry of money is there in a Christian land, in the Christian Church! What revelations are daily made of the light in which we look at money! If there are none now who seek to buy God's gifts with money, at least are there not some who consent to sell their own souls for money? O these dishonesties in trade,

in speculation, in trusts, yes, even in charity! If we really cared for God's gifts, I can even fancy that some of us might offer money for them. If we do not offer money for God's gifts, is it not because we care ten thousand times more for things which money can purchase? Money can get a luxurious table, a well-furnished house, a gay equipage; or, if there is not enough for these, at least it can buy us a humbler or a coarser kind of bodily indulgence: it can do more; it can buy consideration, it can buy flattery, it can buy fawning and cringing, it can buy a thousand attentions while we live, and a few crumbs of gratitude when we lie low in death. But I will tell you what no money can buy: it cannot buy any one of God's highest gifts; it cannot even buy health, or eyesight, or comeliness; it cannot buy the affection of one human being; it cannot buy repose of conscience, hope in death, or a single ray of the sweet and secret and supporting love of God. And therefore a man who learns by long habit to think that money is everything, is as much what the Scripture calls a fool, as he is what the Scripture counts a sinner. That thoroughly mercenary mind is one of the very lowest and most debased types of the fallen

human character. That is the real sin of Simony. It is the state of one who has allowed every trace of the divine to be eaten out of him by the perishable. It is the state of one who thinks that religion itself is a sort of separable external gift, a thing which may be got whole, and put on and worn as a sort of cloke or girdle. The idea of a change of heart, of a new creation, of a gradual, a growing, at last a complete transformation of the mind and soul after God's image, after Christ's likeness; of this he has no conception. If, when he lies on his deathbed, he can command the services of a clergyman, as he can command the services of his lawyer and his physician, that, he thinks, is enough to fit him for his long journey: *Give me also*, he says, *this power*, that I may receive, without having sought, the gift of acceptance with God, and eternal life! This is the very sin of Simon. It is the being altogether of the earth, and yet expecting to have heaven too. It is the bringing all that is base and mean and corruptible, and expecting to receive—not in exchange for it, but along with it—all that is spiritual and eternal and Divine. To such a spirit it may well be said, *Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: Repent therefore of this thy*

wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thy heart may be forgiven thee. Yes, *pray God:* He is *very pitiful, and of tender mercy:* He can unwrap from the soul its long habit of a grovelling worldliness, and give even to the covetous and the mercenary His unspeakable gift of repentance unto life.

4. You have heard to-day the announcement—always one of interest and anxiety in parochial life—of an approaching Confirmation. The passage now before us tells of a laying on of hands, with special prayer for the gift of God's Holy Spirit, at a time subsequent to Baptism. The Evangelist could baptize: but this imposition of hands was reserved for the Apostles alone. We do not say that that imposition of hands was exactly our service of Confirmation. A Bishop is not an Apostle; and the supernatural gifts which then followed, are now neither asked nor given. Still we say that at least a suggestion is here made, which our Church has done wisely to act upon. It is a practice strongly commending itself to right reason as well as to Christian experience, that, when a person has been dedicated to God by others in an ordinance of Baptism administered in infancy, he should be called upon at a later

time to make that unconscious dedication his own by choice; should be required, after due instruction, to say, before Christ and the Church, whether he desires to be a Christian indeed; and should then be solemnly commended to God's perpetual care and guidance by the chief officer of the Christian body, with an earnest invocation upon him of all the manifold gifts of grace. That is Confirmation. It is the coming of age of a Christian man. It is the sealing upon him of all the privileges and all the responsibilities of Church membership. It is his gate of admission to the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It is the entrance upon a conscious, a deliberately chosen, Christian life. That is Confirmation. God grant that it be this, all this, to many amongst us at this time! I would charge it upon all who have children or servants not yet confirmed, and of a suitable age for that act of consecration, to lose no time in sending their names to their ministers, and then to be careful in securing to them every opportunity of attending the course of preparatory instruction soon to be begun. And let the prayers of the congregation go up, week by week and day by day, from this time forward, that God may be

pleased so to bless both the preparation and the service, that many new members may be added to our worshippers and our communicants, and many souls gathered also into that invisible community, of which it is written that it is *a royal priesthood, a peculiar people, offering up spiritual sacrifices*, and *showing forth*, in word and deed, *the praises of Him who hath called it out of darkness into His marvellous light!*

LECTURE XVIII.

A SPECIAL MISSION.

ACTS VIII. 30.

Understandest thou what thou readest?

THE Apostles Peter and John had set out on their return to Jerusalem. In those villages of the Samaritans, upon one of which St John, in the days of his ignorance, had proposed to his Master that they should *call down fire from heaven to consume them* for their unbelief, the same blessed Apostle and Evangelist was now preaching the glad tidings of a Saviour crucified for their sin and risen again for their justification. What a change have two short years wrought in that man! Two years before, his Master had had to turn and rebuke him, saying, in words of unusual severity, to him and to his brother, *Ye know not what manner of spirit*

ye are of. Now he did know. Now he had fully *drunk into* that *Spirit,* whose fruits are *first pure, then peaceable.*

Meanwhile Philip, of whose ministry as the Evangelist of Samaria we have been lately reading, receives a new commission full of interest.

And an angel of the Lord (*Jehovah*) *spake unto Philip, saying, Arise*—the usual call to exertion—*and go southwards to the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza: it is desert.*

The mode of communication is not stated, and we have no other guide than the words themselves. One of those *ministering spirits* who are *sent forth,* the Scripture tells us, *to minister to the heirs of salvation,* was employed to convey to Philip, whether in sleep or by a waking summons, the intimation of duty. He was to go southwards, till he fell into a road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza, a Philistian city, near the coast of the Mediterranean, south-west of Jerusalem. The road is described as *desert.* Geographers say that there were two roads from Jerusalem to Gaza; one through towns and villages, the other taking a shorter cut across the desert. It was necessary, if so, that the message should specify one of these.

And the one specified was (as is often the case in God's commissions of duty) the less probable of the two. What work could an Evangelist find in a wilderness? Send him to towns; bid him preach the word in cities; there he may find large audiences, and hope for great successes: but in a desert—what shall he find there of work for Christ? He will see. Through obedience comes enlightenment; in obedience is success.

Philip was of this character. He *stumbled* not *at the word being disobedient.* Therefore he had his reward.

And he arose and went. He struck into the road indicated in the message, and was left, perhaps, to traverse it for some time ignorant of the cause wherefore he was sent.

And behold, there was an Ethiopian, an eunuch, a chief officer of Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who was over all her treasure, who had come to worship at Jerusalem, and was now *returning* towards his own country, in Africa, south of Egypt, *sitting on his chariot reading the prophet Esaias.*

That he was a proselyte to the Jewish faith, is evident; he had visited Jerusalem on this occasion as a worshipper; and he was engaged

in reading the Old Testament Scriptures. This is all we know. What opportunities he had had, on this or any previous visit to Jerusalem, of hearing of Christ Jesus; how far he had been guilty of turning a deaf ear to previous calls of the Gospel; this we know not: and in the absence of any such information we do well rather to dwell upon the lineaments of his character, as it is drawn for us in this narrative. We see him a serious, enquiring, candid man; a student of God's Holy Word; not ashamed on a journey to be seen and heard reading it; not pleading business or rank or office as an excuse for neglected worship or preoccupied thoughts.

Isaiah must have been to all pious Israelites the Gospel of the Old Testament. It opened a glorious prospect of Him that should come, and of the latter days of Israel and of the Church. To him our Lord turned for a text for His first discourse at Nazareth; *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor;* and said of it, *This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears.* And the Ethiopian, who would *know God better than he knew,* took the same Prophet for his teacher, and in studying him found himself un-

expectedly *taught of God.* Very precious are these links between the old and the new; very sacred the associations which gather round that blessed page in which holy and righteous men of old found themselves initiated beforehand in the mysteries of faith and of the Gospel.

And now Philip's work is opening before him, and he is to find in his own experience that God does nothing and commands nothing in vain.

And the Spirit said to Philip, Approach, and be joined to this chariot. Let it not escape thee: keep close to it: it is to be thy pulpit and thy church this day. See how near the Spirit is to God's messengers, to Christ's servants; how distinct and how minute were His directions and His prohibitions to them of old: if He speaks not now with equal precision, it is (in part at least) because we walk not with Him as closely.

And Philip ran up to it, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. The Ethiopian was a stranger to him and a foreigner; in rank and wealth and consequence he was by far his superior: but what then? he had a message to him, a divine message, and it must be delivered. But not rudely, not abruptly: he

takes occasion from his occupation, and begins with a question, not of trifling things, the news or the weather, yet still in a tone of courtesy, and as one who would rather counsel than command.

And he said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And the other said, Why, how could I, unless some one guide me? And he besought Philip to get up and sit down with him.

Every one notices the humility, candour, and courtesy, which breathed in the answer and in the request accompanying it. As if he had said, I am but an ignorant man in divine things: my work has lain in matters of earthly business; and though I worship God and read His word, yet I need instruction and an instructor: by thy question I perceive that thou art beyond me in the things of God: give me thy company on the way, and we will commune together upon the word of truth. My brethren, we lose much by our reserve towards strangers: if in entertaining strangers *some have entertained angels unawares,* so in communicating with strangers, in the house and by the way, some have found either another's soul to save, or else an Evangelist to enlighten their own. The Ethiopian might have repelled Philip's ques-

tion as an intrusion and an impertinence: in welcoming him as a teacher and an expositor, he found salvation come to his house and to his soul.

Now the section of the Scripture which he was reading was this: you can read it still in our beloved 53rd chapter of Isaiah: *As a sheep was He led to slaughter, and as a lamb voiceless before his shearer, so He openeth not His mouth* in complaint, in murmuring, or in remonstrance: *in His humiliation His judgment was taken away;* that is, in the season of His self-abasement and submission He was deprived of the commonest conditions of a fair trial: *and His generation who shall describe?* who shall tell the wickedness and the violence of the men of that generation which rejected and slew him? *for His life is taken away from the earth.* The words are difficult and ambiguous: taken from the Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, they differ in some respects from the Hebrew original, and therefore also from our Authorized Translation: even as they here stand, some would render them differently. But our business now is rather with their general sense than with their minute interpretation.

And the eunuch answered Philip and said—that is, said in reference to the words read from Isaiah—*I pray thee, of whom doth the prophet say this? of himself, or of some one else?* The question strikes us as an ignorant one: but, alas! how many, even in our own day, even in a Christian Church, are still asking it! *And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, told him the glad news of Jesus.* So then there was no doubt in those days what the 53rd chapter of Isaiah meant. It was not thought impossible then that *holy men of God* should *speak as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.* It has been reserved for these times to discard from the evidences of our faith both miracle and prophecy. Let us not seek to be *wise above what is written,* but cling with thankful hope to all that God has given us in proof of His Son!

And as they went on their way, they came to some water—not a common object on that desert journey—*and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water: what hinders my being baptized?* It is natural to suppose that Philip, in preaching Jesus, had mentioned His ordinance of Baptism; had quoted, perhaps, to him the well-known promise, *He that believeth and is bap-*

tized shall be saved: and in the growing confidence of his new faith, the Ethiopian would fain satisfy at once the outward as well as the inward condition of salvation: when, if not now, could he hope for either a Christian teacher or a Christian baptist?

And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. It is more than doubtful whether this verse is really a part of the text. It is not found in the best manuscripts. And we may thank God that we are not dependent upon it for any doctrine. We know well, from other passages, what was the one requisite for Christian Baptism; the confession of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and as the Son of Man. Whether therefore the words before us be in or out, we shall equally know that the Ethiopian did confess the faith of Christ before his Baptism, and was admitted, on the strength of that profession, to the sacrament of Christian incorporation.

And he commanded that the chariot should stop; and they went down, both of them, into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the

water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, and the eunuch saw him no longer; for he went on his way rejoicing. Whether by a sudden inward summons to depart, like that by which he had been commanded to come; or by a miraculous withdrawal, such as God could employ, in this or any other case, at His pleasure; further communication was precluded between the convert and his evangelist: the work was done for which Philip came; *the work of faith with power*, the work of an abiding conversion, the work of love and hope and great joy: the Ethiopian *saw him no more;* and it mattered not; he stayed not to seek or to murmur; *for he went on his way rejoicing. And Philip was found at Azotus:* when next he was seen, it was there, twenty miles northward from Gaza; *and passing through, he evangelized all the towns,* proclaimed his glad tidings in every place through which he journeyed, *till he came to Cæsarea.* There, at a distant day, we shall find him and hear of him again.

Meanwhile let us gather up some of those truths which *he being dead yet speaks* to us in this history.

1. And first one brief word as to the practical care of God for the individual souls of men.

The object of all this whole transaction; this call, this journey, this preaching, this baptism; was one single conversion, one single salvation. Surely we see in it a proof, not only that God *will have all men to be saved,* but that He will have each man separately to be saved. With thankfulness may we rest, as upon the universality, so upon the minuteness, of God's love and of God's care for us. None of us can say that he is too insignificant for God's regard. See what God did for this stranger; how He raised up an Evangelist for him, and marvellously threw him in his way, on purpose that he, he personally, he individually, might see salvation! The course of human life is still full of these interventions, of these special calls and missions. Look into your own life, and can you not see some such dealing of God even with you?

And then we should notice how it is through such single, several agencies that the work of God, His chief and most abiding work, is ever wrought in our world. The Gospel has some, yea, many influences of a more general nature upon human life and human affairs. We do well to recognize these, and to give thanks for them. But the truest, highest, deepest work

of God is wrought through the thorough inward change of individual hearts. Each soul that is really brought thus to God becomes in its turn a little centre of light and life, from which shines forth the truth and the grace, the illumination and the persuasion, which is to draw others also after Him. We must never count any time wasted, that is spent upon the instruction and the conviction and the correction of one human being. That work, if it be genuine, if it be heart-deep, is a work, not of a narrow, isolated character, but of extended, it may be of large and wide influence, upon the cause of Christ and of the Gospel in the world around. And let no man count his own soul's culture a thing of trifling moment. He too, if he be indeed brought to God, may be in his turn the Evangelist, if not of a nation, yet at least of a family, at least of some one precious human soul. Thus, even thus, does God work: happy are they who thus, even thus, can work with Him!

2. Secondly, as to the importance of being always ready for duty.

Your feet shod, St Paul writes, *with the preparation of the Gospel of peace.* It is one part of the Christian armour; a Gospel readiness

for action. Philip had to take a long journey in quest of one convert. Nay, without knowing beforehand that he was to make one convert. He was told to go and strike into a road which was desert. O what excuses, what answerings again, should we have made in reply to such a call! How should we have urged the disproportion between the means and the end; the distance, the difficulty, the improbability, the waste of strength and time; till at length we should have gone one degree further, and persuaded ourselves that we never were called to it, that there had been a mistake, that God had not spoken. It was not thus with the blessed Evangelist before us. *He went forth, not knowing whither he went.* He only knew that the call was clear, and that God was all-wise.

God does not now speak to us by an Angel, or say expressly by a voice within, Go here or go there. Yet, besides His more obvious commands as to the fulfilment of duty and as to the avoidance of sin, you all know that there is often something within you which says, There is such or such a person whom you might benefit in soul or body, such or such a friend whom you have lately neglected, such or such a

poor neighbour whom you might visit for comfort or cheering or counsel. These monitions are akin (though in a humble degree) to the call which reached Philip, *Arise, and go toward the south.* And these inward promptings are easily resisted. They do not come to us exactly in the form of injunctions or prohibitions. They are rather suggestions, optional suggestions, which it is not apparently a sin to put aside. In the same degree are they the better tests and touchstones of our Christianity. They say to us, Here is something which you might do for your Saviour. Perhaps it may fail; but there is a chance also of its succeeding. If you feel your debt to Him as you ought, you will go and do it. At the same time I do not say that you will sin if you do it not. And this alternative, this liberty to go or not to go, this absence of command and yet suggestion of a possible good, shows an honest man what he is. If he always finds an excuse for putting it aside; if he always persuades himself that he is not called to it; if he is glad when something occurs to make it for the time impossible; if he rejoices in discovering that weather or business or health has taken off from him the burden of present duty; then he should indeed

suspect strongly the nature or the vitality of his faith; he has upon him at present the mark of the unprofitable servant, who was satisfied to *dig in the earth, and hide his Lord's money.*

On the other hand, how frequently—not always, but frequently—is an effort of this kind consciously rewarded! You have roused yourself to leave your warm fireside; you have walked through rain or snow to the poor man's cottage, or you have dragged yourself, indisposed and weary, to the home of some dull and uncongenial acquaintance; and you regarded it all as a penance, or as a good deed to be put down to your reckoning: how often have you found that that day was one on which your visit was singularly seasonable; it was a day of peculiar distress, of unusual loneliness, of absolute destitution, to the person whom you sought out: or else it was a day on which the heart long closed was opener than ever before to the word and to the love of Christ, and it was your happiness to be an evident instrument in God's hand for the refreshment or encouragement or restoration of a human soul for which Christ died and rose. These things, not indeed to be reckoned upon or

looked for, yet are God's occasional means of giving to him that hath, of drawing onward in the path of love one who has just set his first foot upon it, of showing us that *His service is perfect freedom,* that *in keeping of His commandments there is great reward.*

3. And next as to the importance of being always in pursuit of good.

Philip was ready to go: the Ethiopian was prepared to receive him. He was studying and musing over God's Word. He was trying to make it out and to put it together; trying to read on till he should understand; eager to hail a new teacher, however humble his rank or however alien his race. *To him that hath shall be given.* That is God's rule. If we would have, we must use. This man had an Old Testament. You scarcely know, possessing the New Testament also, how dark the sayings of the Old must have been to him without it. Many of us would have said—for we say it now—I can make nothing of the Old Testament. It only puzzles me: it makes my darkness darker, and my ignorance more ignorant. I will let it alone. But so did not the Ethiopian nobleman. He, like Simeon, like Nathanael, like older saints still of whom we

have the record in the Bible, *desired to look into* the mysteries of the ancient Scriptures, *searched* with themselves *what or what manner of time*, what or what manner of event, the inspiring *Spirit did signify, when it testified beforehand* of things that should be hereafter, and pointed men's thoughts onward to the expectation of One that should come. And therefore they saw what to others was mere confusion. *Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad.* Half the revelations of God depend upon the piety and reverence of him who receives them. There is a growth in knowledge proportionate to a growth in grace.

Many of us err grievously, at last err fatally, in this respect. We have no patience, and we have no humility, in the things of God. When we are asked, *Understandest thou what thou readest?* we answer confidently, *I see,* and therefore our blindness becomes permanent. *How can I except some man should guide me?* how hopeful, and how rare, is that answer! No: we take it for granted that in God's truth a thing must either be self-evident or unimportant. In this one, this greatest science of all, we consider study superfluous. And yet

there is probably no part of God's revelation, which is intelligible (spiritually, I mean) to a superficial study. When first we enter that sacred chamber, fresh from the glaring lights and tinsel vanities of this world, all is darkness; we can discern nothing; we are ready to say there is nothing to discern. Wait awhile. Habituate your eye to that shade. By degrees a faint glimmering of light will reward your patience. In an hour you begin to distinguish objects, and to move amongst them freely. If you had gone out at once in your first disappointment, what would you not have missed? Read on now in that holy page; new light will be thrown upon it day by day: in a year you will marvel at your first incredulity: and when the question comes again to you, *Understandest thou what thou readest?* you will be ready to answer, *Not I, but the grace of God which is with me.*

Thus are the words verified in every age, *Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.* Again and again has the Bible been its own interpreter to those who studied it as in God's presence. Wonderful are the reports of those who have seen, in foreign lands or in our own,

what the unaided Book can do for the humble and the earnest-minded. God shines upon the page by His Spirit, and there comes forth from it at last a marvellous light. Not to supersede the human teacher, but to prepare the ground for him; to give him the joyful surprise of saying, *This hath God done, perceiving that it is His work;* for the confirmation of his faith as of all who shall hear his testimony; it is found again and again that God has thus, by His own Scriptures alone, *out of the very mouth of babes perfected strength, that He may still* the arrogant pride of *the enemy and the avenger.*

4. Lastly, the narrative before us illustrates the importance, both for strength and for comfort, of holding a simple Gospel.

Many of us pass through life without one single experience of the effect of the Gospel upon this stranger. We are so mistaught, or else so slow to learn; we are so afraid of presumption, and so fond of adding something of our own to the work and word of God; that we never reach anything that can call itself *the glad tidings of Jesus,* or send us forth *on our way rejoicing.* What Philip preached, what the Ethiopian received, was something which needed but one conversation for its statement,

and but one hour for its reception. Evidently it was the simple declaration of a Saviour; a Saviour complete in His work for man; a Saviour, Himself our Propitiation, our Righteousness, and our Strength; our Sacrifice for sin, our Example of holiness, our Almighty Enabler and Renewer by His holy and indwelling Spirit. This is what Philip preached. *If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.* That is the Gospel, as God sent it, as Christ ratified it, as the Evangelists and Apostles preached it. Out of this Gospel flows all peace and all strength. Alas! we have added to it, and we have subtracted from it, till its vital energy is lost. God give us grace, ere it be too late, to call it back! There is none other. Any other Gospel is destitute of God's strength, because destitute of God's wisdom. No other Gospel is *the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.* By that test shall ye know *the precious from the vile.* Take Christ wholly for your Saviour: see yourself lost, see Him an entire Propitiation; ask of God to receive you as you are, and to look upon you only in Christ: and upon you, in the

same proportion, will arise in no long time a glorious light: in you will be fulfilled, as in thousands before you, the memorable words, *Surely, shall one say, In the Lord have I righteousness and strength...In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory!*

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